

A Digital Map of Historical Cafés

U-M undergrads are using Geographic Information Systems to study Jewish literature.

It was an unusual topic, with a lot of geographic material, and Shachar Pinsker was looking for an effective way to teach it.

Pinsker, who is associate professor of Hebrew language and literature at the Frankel Center, had just completed his year as a 2013–14 Frankel Institute fellow. His research focused on the role of urban cafés in the formation of modern Jewish culture during the late 19th and early 20th century in Eastern and Central Europe, North America, and Israel. He believed that cafés played a key role as centers of political, financial, scientific, and literary exchange, and was eager to present his findings in a new course for undergrads. But how?

Pinsker turned to Justin Joque, a visualization librarian at U-M's Clark Library, who began scanning and geo-referencing maps from the time period that Pinsker was teaching. Joque ultimately connected him with Peter Knoop, a research computing consultant for LSA Information Technology, for a high-tech solution.

Knoop recalled his initial meeting with Shachar. "What was most interesting to me," Knoop said, "was that this was a good example of geographic data that is challenging to present in typical ways, because it really has nothing to do with the boundaries of existing countries."

Knoop introduced them to ArcGIS Story Maps, which combines geographic data and multimedia content in an online presentation.

The technology would allow students, for example, to create layers of maps comparing different time periods, while also including text, links, and images of cafés and the people who frequented them. It would be the first time such technology would be utilized in a U-M humanities course.

"I was both excited and concerned about using technology in this course," Pinsker admitted. "Excited because I knew that it would enable students to get to know the space and history of cities, cafés, and Jewish culture in a totally different way. And concerned about the technology, because I had no previous experience with the tools."

With the help of a team of graduate students, Knoop ran workshops to train Pinsker's class in Story Maps. The students, he said, caught on quickly, and eventually created projects that were rich in data and images.

"They instinctively know how to pan around a map, they are familiar with the hand icon, they know how to scroll, and they know how to use the mouse or two fingers on the Mac," Knoop explained. "They have a lot of different basic skill sets than students had even five years ago."

The success of the "Urban Cafés and Modern Jewish Culture" course set a technological precedent at U-M. The course was first offered in fall 2014 and is being repeated this year. Last spring, the Departments of

Photo by Ruby Wallau



Above, Shachar Pinsker uses mapping technology in his course while his students, right, follow along.

Anthropology and Afroamerican and African Studies offered a course that utilized the same technology. Knoop hopes that other professors and departments will soon follow their example.

"It changed the way I do the research and how I understand the topic I currently write about," noted Pinsker. "The digital mapping and the integration of maps, images, and texts were incorporated into my thinking about Jewish café culture in a variety of cities and transformed the ways I approach it.

"The same thing happened to the students who read texts, saw images, and reviewed other materials and

From Our Students



Name: Rachel Shuster

From: Dix Hills, New York

Major: Undecided, but considering psychology

"I was definitely surprised to discover that the course would be requiring the use of technology to create maps. At first, I was a little nervous to be using new programs and technology for a Judaic Studies class. But I was surprised by how much creating the maps helped me to understand the material.

"We created a map of Odessa that included important cafés, homes of sages and more! Putting all the information I have learned about Odessa into a concise location was very helpful."



Name: Jody Liu

From: Ann Arbor

Major: Anthropology

"I was a little confused by the technology at first, but I thought it was a dynamic way to interact with the materials we learned in class. It allowed for a visual representation of the cafés we discussed. The maps also offered a look into the changes that had occurred with the reconstruction of cities that were basically razed during World War II.

"Although most of my classes use technology as part of lectures, very few allow us to use technology in an interactive fashion. This course changed that, and I thought it was a great addition."

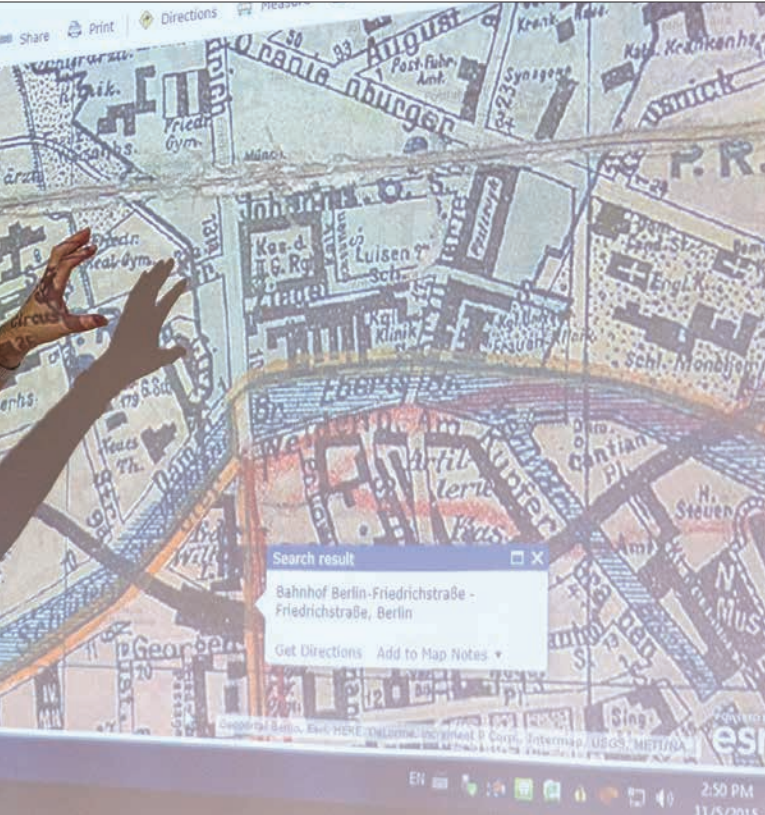


Photo by Ruby Wallau



pieces of information in the course. It was the digital project that enabled them to bring it all together and show, in a visually enticing and rich way, how they understood it." ■