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St. Petersburg Fulbright Scholar to Lecture on Jewish Folk Culture
November 21, 2006

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - Valery Dymshits, the director of the Center Petersburg Judaica of St. Petersburg, Russia, and Fulbright-Scholar-in-Residence at Illinois Wesleyan University this fall, will lecture on "Field Studies in Jewish Anthropology: Past and Present" in the Beckman Auditorium of The Ames Library on Thursday, Nov. 30, at 4 p.m.

The talk is free and open to the public.

Dymshits' research addresses the fieldwork, consisting of firsthand interviews, that he and his colleagues have done on the transmission of Jewish oral culture in Ukraine.

The interviews were, in part, an attempt to create a general survey of the Ukrainian Jewish folk culture and, in part, an analysis of how its elements have changed over the last 100 years. Dymshits and his colleagues compared their research to similar material gathered early in the 20th century in order to determine how the culture's oral traditions had changed since the Holocaust.

"Our fieldwork is the first research on such a topic in the whole period after the second World War," Dymshits said. "We are pioneers in this field."

Dymshits gathered records of stories, songs, beliefs, superstitions and traditions, creating a place for Jewish folk culture within the established scheme of Jewish studies. According to Dymshits, folk culture is often overlooked in favor of documented history.

"Oral history is a sort of parallel history that is often quite far from history based on documents," Dymshits said. "Especially in Jewish studies, in philology, history, rabbinical studies, theology, philosophy- there are always more texts than people. Speaking to people gives us a way to understand things that are not in the texts."

This fall, Dymshits is teaching a course on Jewish folk culture as part of IWU's Russian and East European Studies program. In addition to teaching at IWU, he has presented lectures this fall in Ann Arbor, Mich., Urbana-Champaign, Ill., and Washington, D.C. He hopes to speak at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., this December.

Dymshits is a graduate of St. Petersburg Technological Institute, where he received the degree of candidate of science in 1992 and the degree of doctor of science (chemistry) in 1996. In 1989 he took part in founding St. Petersburg Jewish University and, in 1992, participated in the creation of the Institute of Jewish Diaspora Research and has served as the head of the institute.



Valery Dymshits

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