

# THE STORY OF YIVO'S POLISH JEWISH ARCHIVE

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Street scene in the town of Czortkow, Poland. Photograph by Alter Kacyzne. YIVO Archives.  
Courtesy of the Forward Association.

## Introduction

This website makes available a treasure trove of historical documents that illuminate the history of Polish Jewry.

These documents were collected and preserved by the YIVO Institute in Vilna from its founding in 1925 until the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. Other materials were later added in New York, where YIVO relocated in 1940. Many of the new collections acquired in the postwar years pertain to the Holocaust period.



Members of YIVO's Aspirantur (graduate studies) program, Vilna, 1939. (First row, 3rd from left) Lucy Schildkret, who later, as Lucy Dawidowicz, wrote *The War Against the Jews* (1975), and *From That Place and Time* (New York, 1989), a memoir of her stay in Vilna on the eve of World War II. YIVO Archives.

## YIVO in Vilna: The Seminal Years

Founded in Vilna (Wilno, Poland; now Vilnius, Lithuania) in 1925 to promote the study of Yiddish and of East European Jewish history and culture, YIVO became a leading academic institution of the Polish and East European Jewish community. A pioneer in the field of Jewish archives in Poland, it launched popular collection campaigns which reached out to the Jewish population in Poland, asking people to gather and send in letters, manuscripts, posters and broadsides, newspapers, pamphlets, artworks, and photographs relating to all aspects of Jewish life. YIVO created a vast body of documentation on Jewish life in Europe and became known worldwide as an authority in all matters related to Yiddish language and culture. In the 1920s and 1930s, societies of Friends of YIVO were active in Poland, the Baltics, Germany, France, England, North and South America, South Africa, and Palestine. The American Branch of YIVO (*Amerikaner opteyl*, or *Amopteyl* in Yiddish) was organized in 1926.



Reading Room of the Strashun Library in Vilna. A portrait of Matisyahu Strashun who donated his collection of 7000 volumes to the Vilna Jewish Community hangs overhead in the background. A substantial portion of the Strashun Collection was sent to YIVO after the war. YIVO Archives.

## Collecting (*Zamling*) for YIVO

The goal of creating a research library and an archives was of primary importance to YIVO. Each of its research sections – Linguistics, History, Education and Psychology, Economics and Statistics – in addition to the Archives proper, was involved in gathering research materials. YIVO encouraged its correspondents, people from all social groups and all levels of education, to join in the work of collecting for the institute. Hundreds of collectors (*zamlers* in Yiddish) worked individually or in groups (*zamlers krayzn*) to enrich the YIVO collections.



Shmuel Lehman, folklorist, with a circle of folklore *zamlers* (collectors), Warsaw, 1931. YIVO Archives.



## YIVO's *Zamler* Tradition

The *zamler* tradition precedes YIVO by several decades, having originated with the prominent historian Simon Dubnow who issued a call in 1891 to the Jews in Russia and Poland not to forsake their history and to work toward rescuing documents of the Jewish past from oblivion. Dubnow's appeal resonated in the years to come and became a blueprint for collaborative gathering of historical documentation, laying the groundwork for research and preservation by learned societies and individuals alike.



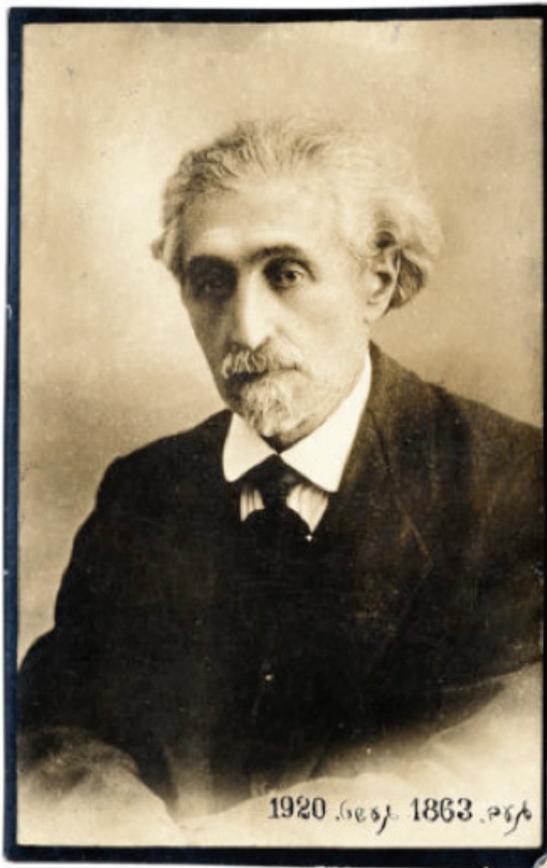
Simon Dubnow, historian and a founder of YIVO, believed in Jewish cultural autonomy and was concerned for the survival of Jewish cultural treasures. He was a contemporary of the Hebrew national poet Hayyim Nachman Bialik and of the Zionist thinker Ahad Ha-am. YIVO Archives.

## The Ansky Expedition

From 1912 through 1914, the S. Ansky Ethnographic Expedition, sponsored by Baron Vladimir de Guenzburg, carried out a groundbreaking three year project in the study of Jewish folklife, visiting towns and villages through Volhynia and Podolia and recording Jewish customs, folk songs, and folklore. Influenced by both Dubnow and the Jewish ethnography movement, the YIVO Institute created a collaborative collecting network, making it the basis of a vast and singularly successful *zamlar* program.



Zusman Kisselhof, a member of the S. Ansky Ethnographic Expedition to Volhynia and Podolia, making sound recordings of Jewish folklore. YIVO Archives.



S. Ansky, leader of the ethnographic expedition carried out from 1912-1914. His famous play *The Dybbuk*, was based on Hasidic legends collected during the expedition. YIVO Archives.

As historian Cecile Kuznitz notes,

YIVO scholars believed that the collection of data was the necessary foundation of their work. Only after such a body of information was assembled could they analyze the gathered material to gain insight into the Jewish past and present.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, each department of YIVO had *zamlers* who gathered large quantities of documents or were engaged in writing down stories, folksongs, sayings, and other types of oral testimony from informants. YIVO sections and their sub-divisions (notably, the Ethnographic Commission, Terminological Commission, and Bibliographic Center) depended a great deal on questionnaires on a variety of topics that they developed and sent out to their *zamlers* for use in the field.

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1. Cecile Esther Kuznitz, *The Origins of Yiddish Scholarship and the YIVO Institute For Jewish Research*. PhD dissertation (unpublished), 174.

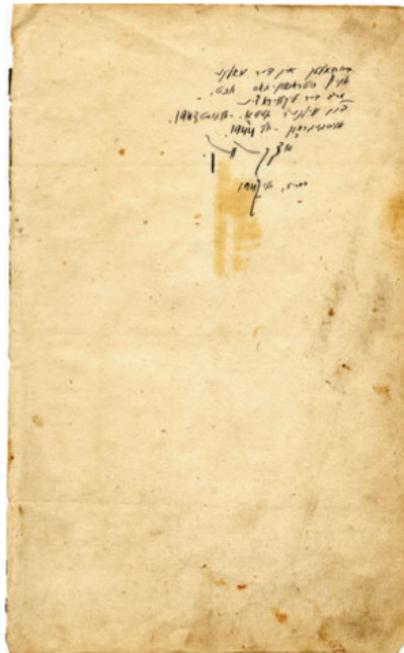
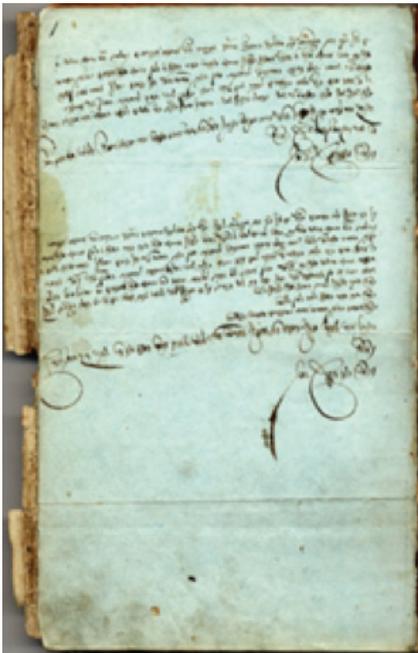
# Studying Jewish Life in Interwar Poland

The Historical Commission enlisted its *zamlers* to research and record the history of the Jewish communities in the places where they themselves lived, and locate and, if possible, copy *pinkasim* (community record books and chronicles). A call from YIVO to young people to write and send in their autobiographies resulted in a collection of close to 650 autobiographies and in the creation at YIVO of a new department, *Yugntforshung* (Research on Youth) for the study of the young generation in times of crisis.

## Polish Jewry and the Holocaust

Under the Nazi occupation of Poland, Polish Jewish civilization and its material and spiritual heritage came close to total extinction. Entire Jewish communities were wiped out.

Jewish libraries and communal archives throughout the country were vandalized and systematically destroyed, leaving only remnants and traces. Only fragments remained of the heritage which had taken more than a thousand years to grow and accumulate.



The Pinkas (Register Book) of the Vilna Gaon's Synagogue. Called the Vilna Gaon's *Kloyz*, it was founded just after the passing of the Gaon in 1797. The first page on the left, above, bears the signature of the Vilna Gaon's son. On the inside page, appearing on the right, there is a dedication by Avraham Sutzkever to YIVO. Sutzkever saved and hid the volume and recovered it after the war. Sutzkever-Kaczerginski Collection, Part II: Literary and Historical Manuscripts. YIVO Archives.



Members of the “paper brigade” (Szmerke Kaczerginski in the center) sorting books under the watch of the Einsatzstab Rosenberg. YIVO Archives.

During the Nazi occupation of Vilna, the YIVO collections were looted and ransacked by the Einsatzstab Rosenberg (Nazi office for the plunder of Jewish artistic and cultural property), and parts of the YIVO library and archives were shipped to Germany. Jewish workers were assigned to the job of dividing the archival and library materials into two groups, one to be sent to Germany, and the other to be discarded.

Nicknamed “the paper brigade,” several brave men and women under the leadership of the poets Avraham Sutzkever and Szmerke Kaczerginski endeavored to rescue selected items from the scrap heap and to carry them away to hiding places. The ghetto librarian Herman Kruk wrote in his diary on July 9, 1942:

The library, the documents, the archives are all mixed up in one mess and following the Germans’ orders segregated, and most of it is thrown away as scrap. A small part remains where it is waiting to be transported [to Germany] Seeing that destruction, several staff members picked out a lot of literature and brought it to Mr. Kapral [Kruk’s pseudonym]. The risk to their life by taking away any piece of paper is awesome. Nevertheless there are idealists who do it easily.”<sup>2</sup>

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2. Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-1944*, edited by Benjamin Harshav, translated by Barbara Harshav (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, co-published with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), 321.



Emmanuel Ringelblum, Jewish historian and creator of the underground Oyneg Shabes Archive in the Warsaw Ghetto. YIVO Archives.



A view of the Warsaw Ghetto in ruins. YIVO Archives.

## The Oyneg Shabes Underground Archive

The *zamlers* ethic did not cease with the destruction of YIVO. The resolve to gather materials documenting the fate of the Jews in Poland lived on in the most tragic circumstances, as symbolized by the prominent YIVO-affiliated historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who rekindled the *zamlers* idea in the Warsaw Ghetto, this time for the purpose of recording for posterity the truth of the Nazi crime of genocide. In creating the clandestine Oyneg Shabes [Oneg Shabbat] Archive, Ringelblum utilized the experience he had gained during his involvement with the YIVO Historical Commission.

As historian Samuel Kassow notes, “If any one prewar institution shaped the ethos of the Oyneg Shabes it was clearly the YIVO Institute...”<sup>3</sup>

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3. Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 147.



Members of YIVO Board and staff in New York viewing books and archival collections rescued from destruction and recovered with the help of the U.S. army in 1947. YIVO Archives.

## Gathering the Remnant

Though YIVO in Vilna was destroyed by the Nazis, parts of its archives and library survived and were reclaimed after the war by the Institute which had relocated to New York in 1940. In 1947, fragments of YIVO collections which had been looted by the Nazis and shipped to Germany, were sent from the U.S. Army Archival Depot in Offenbach to YIVO in New York in 420 crates.

This was the largest, but not the only group of materials successfully reclaimed by YIVO after the war; another important segment known as the archive of the YIVO History Section (or the Elias Tcherikover Archive) was hidden in southern France and also reunited with YIVO after the war. Efforts to achieve the integration of YIVO's Vilna Archives, portions of which remain in Lithuania as well as in other countries, continue to this day.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the YIVO Archives continues the Vilna tradition of actively collecting historical documents. The Archives reaches out to individuals and institutions for documents which are significant for the study of Jewish communities before World War II; their annihilation in the Holocaust; and the renewal of Jewish life in the post war period.

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4. See, for instance, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From That Place And Time, A Memoir 1938-1947* (New York: W.W. Norton @ Company, 1989), p.299ff.; Marek Web, "YIVO Vilna to YIVO New York – an Archives Transformed," in: Frank M. Bischoff, Peter Honigman eds., *Juedische Archivwesen*, Marburg 2005, 155.