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Inhalt

Raphael Gross Editorial	9
--------------------------------------	---

Allgemeiner Teil

Brian Horowitz, <i>New Orleans, La.</i> Principle or Expediency: Vladimir Jabotinsky's Displays of Violence and the Construction of His Leadership	15
---	----

David Biale, <i>Davis, Calif.</i> Experience vs. Tradition: Reflections on the Origins of the Buber-Scholem Controversy	33
---	----

Brian M. Smollett, <i>New York</i> Nationalism, Belonging, and Crisis: The Paths of Koppel S. Pinson and Hans Kohn	49
--	----

Atina Grossmann, <i>New York</i> Remapping Survival: Jewish Refugees and Lost Memories of Displacement, Trauma, and Rescue in Soviet Central Asia, Iran, and India	71
---	----

Schwerpunkt

“Jewish Questions” in International Politics – Diplomacy, Rights and Intervention

Herausgegeben von Markus Kirchhoff und Gil Rubin

Markus Kirchhoff/Gil Rubin, <i>Leipzig/New York</i> Introduction	101
---	-----

Israel Bartal, <i>Jerusalem</i> From <i>Shtadlanut</i> to “Jewish Diplomacy”? 1756 – 1840 – 1881	109
--	-----

Carsten L. Wilke, <i>Budapest</i> Competitive Advocacy: The Romanian Committee of Berlin and the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1872–1878	131
David Engel, <i>New York</i> The Elite and the Street: The Schwarzbard Affair (1926–1927) as a Turning Point in Jewish Diplomacy	157
Philipp Graf, <i>Leipzig</i> The Bernheim Petition 1933: Probing the Limits of Jewish Diplomacy in the Interwar Period	167
Nathan Kurz, <i>London</i> In the Shadow of Versailles: Jewish Minority Rights at the 1946 Paris Peace Conference	187
James Loeffler, <i>Charlottesville, Va.</i> “The Famous Trinity of 1917”: Zionist Internationalism in Historical Perspective	211
Markus Kirchhoff, <i>Leipzig</i> The Westphalian System as a Jewish Concern – Re-Reading Leo Gross’ 1948 “Westphalia” Article	239
Miriam Rürup, <i>Hamburg</i> The Right to be Stateless: Dealing with Statelessness after World War II	265
Carole Fink, <i>Columbus, Oh.</i> Negotiating after Negotiations: Nahum Goldmann, West Germany, and the Origins of the 1980 Hardship Fund	287
Schwerpunkt Bruchlinien – Deutsch-israelische Wissenschaftsbeziehungen seit 1959 <i>Herausgegeben von Jörg Deventer und Magnus Klaue</i>	
Jörg Deventer/Magnus Klaue, <i>Leipzig</i> Einführung	309

Irene Aue-Ben-David/Yonatan Shiloh-Dayan, <i>Jerusalem</i> Observant Ventures: Early German-Israeli Conferences on German History	315
Ari Barell/Ute Deichmann, <i>Beer Sheva</i> Internationality as Moral Challenge and Practical Success: The Origin and Early Development of the Israeli-German Collaboration in the Sciences	341
Sharon Livne/Amos Morris-Reich, <i>Haifa</i> Early Contacts in Genetics, 1949–1965: A Historical-Sociological Perspective	371
Jenny Hestermann, <i>Frankfurt am Main</i> Vor der Diplomatie: Deutsch-israelische Wissenschaftsbeziehungen als Brückenbauer? . . .	399
Roni Stauber, <i>Tel Aviv</i> Zwischen Erinnerungspolitik und Realpolitik: Die israelische Diplomatie und das Verhältnis der Bundesrepublik zum Nationalsozialismus	419

Gelehrtenporträt

Lisa Moses Leff, <i>Washington, D. C.</i> Zosa Szajkowski: Archivdieb und Pionier der französisch-jüdischen Geschichtsschreibung	447
---	-----

Dubnowiana

Cecile E. Kuznitz, <i>Annandale-on-Hudson, N. Y.</i> YIVO's "Old Friend and Teacher": Simon Dubnow and his Relationship to the Yiddish Scientific Institute	477
---	-----

Appendix

Seven Letters of Simon Dubnow Concerning His Relationship to the Yiddish Scientific Institute, Selected and Annotated by Cecile E. Kuznitz, and Transl. from the Yiddish by Vera Szabó	496
--	-----

Aus der Forschung

Lutz Fiedler, <i>Jerusalem</i> Drei Geschichten einer Desillusionierung – Wassili Grossman, Ilja Ehrenburg und das Jüdische Antifaschistische Komitee	511
--	-----

Literaturbericht

Elisabeth Gallas, <i>Leipzig</i> Frühe Holocaustforschung in Amerika: Dokumentation, Zeugenschaft und Begriffsbildung	535
Abstracts	571
Contributors	583

Cecile E. Kuznitz

YIVO's "Old Friend and Teacher": Simon Dubnow and his Relationship to the Yiddish Scientific Institute

The figure of Simon Dubnow loomed large throughout the history of the Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut (Yiddish Scientific Institute), known by its acronym YIVO. As the first center devoted to scholarship in Yiddish and about the history and culture of Yiddish-speaking Jewry, YIVO drew extensively on Dubnow's work as a historian as well as his theories of diaspora nationalism. In addition, Dubnow enjoyed close personal relationships with several of YIVO's founders, who considered him both a friend and mentor.

The institute's leaders often expressed their admiration of Dubnow, referring to him with a mixture of reverence and affection. The editors of the second volume of YIVO's *Historishe shriftn* (Historical Writings), which was dedicated to Dubnow, called him an "old friend and teacher, who is so intimately connected with the Yiddish Scientific Institute."¹ At other times he was described as "one of the builders"² and "one of the pillars of YIVO."³ His stature was such that Jacob Lestschinsky, the head of YIVO's Economic-Statistical Section, argued that the 1929 YIVO conference should be postponed once Dubnow declined to attend since it was bound to fail without his participation.⁴ Dubnow reciprocated such sentiments towards what he referred to as "our institute,"⁵ lauding "its significance [...] in the intellectual revival of our people."⁶

Given such mutual praise, as well as the close professional and personal ties between the historian and the institute, one might well expect Dubnow to

- 1 Elias Tcherikower (ed.), *Historishe shriftn* [Historical Writings], vol. 2, Vilna 1937, xiv.
- 2 RG 1.1, Records of YIVO (Vilna): Administration, Folder 20, Executive Office, YIVO to Simon Dubnow, 22 September 1930. All archival citations refer to the collections of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.
- 3 RG 1.3, Records of YIVO (Vilna): Aspirantur, Folder 4056, Fayerlekhe zitsung mitn onteyl fun prof. dubnov [Festive Meeting with Prof. Dubnow's Participation], 24 April 1940.
- 4 RG 82, Tcherikower Archive (YIVO, Vilna), Folder 2141, Jacob Lestschinsky to Elias Tcherikower, 1 September 1929 and 7 October 1929.
- 5 RG 1.1, Lithuanian addendum, Folder 15, Simon Dubnow to Zalman Reisen and Zelig Kalmanovitch, 8 December 1935. Originals of all documents in this folder are located in the Lithuanian Central State Archives, Fond 287.
- 6 *Ibid.*, Simon Dubnow, *Di historishe badaytung funem idishn visnshaftlekhn institut* [The Historical Significance of the Yiddish Scientific Institute], 1929.

have been a consistently enthusiastic participant in YIVO's activities. Indeed, in 1934 the linguist and journalist Zalman Reizen, one of its leaders, described him as "one of the co-founders of YIVO, who always takes an active part in its work."⁷ The reality, however, is a bit more complicated. The story of Dubnow's relations with YIVO reflects his ambivalence about balancing commitments to scholarship and to communal work, both in the service of the Jewish people. It also illuminates the constraints facing diaspora nationalists – Dubnow's intellectual heirs – as they set out to build a modern culture in the Yiddish language in interwar Eastern Europe.

Laying the Foundation for Yiddish Scholarship

The importance of Dubnow's career in laying the foundation for YIVO's work can hardly be exaggerated. Elias Tcherikower, the head of the institute's Historical Section, wrote that before Dubnow's efforts, Yiddish scholarship lacked a "general plan for building, a central idea and living spirit."⁸ Both Dubnow and YIVO considered preserving the record of Jewish culture to be a crucial first step before scholars could pursue analytical research. In 1891 Dubnow published a famous essay in the Russian journal *Voskhod* (Dawn), lamenting East European Jews' ignorance of their own past and calling on them to collect historic documents. His appeal led numerous readers to send him valuable books and papers, some of which eventually made their way to the YIVO Archives.⁹ This initiative inspired YIVO's own efforts to gather both historical and contemporary material as the first stage of its work. Such collecting was largely carried out by *zamlers* (collectors), men and women who worked on behalf of the institute in Yiddish-speaking communities throughout the world.¹⁰ Through the *zamlers'* work, the *folk* – the

7 RG 82, Folder 2220, Protocol 159, Meeting of the Executive Office, 23 August 1934.

8 Tcherikower (ed.), *Historishe shriftn*, vol. 2, xi.

9 See Simon M. Dubnow, *Ob izuchenii istorii russkikh evreev i ob uchrezhdenii russko-evreiskago istoricheskago obshchestva* [On the Study of the History of the Russian Jews and on the Establishment of a Russian-Jewish Historical Society], in: *Voskhod* [Dawn] 4 (April–September 1891), no. 9, 1–91. A Hebrew version was published the following year. See Simon Dubnow, *Nahpesah ve-nahkorah* [Let Us Search and Investigate], in: *Pardes* 1 (1891), 221–242. On this material in the YIVO Archives, see Marek Web, *Dubnow and Jewish Archives. An Introduction to his Papers at the YIVO Institute*, in: Kristi Groberg/Avraham Greenbaum (eds.), *A Missionary for History. Essays in Honor of Simon Dubnov*, Minneapolis, Minn., 1998, 87–92.

10 On YIVO's collecting work and the *zamlers*, see Cecile Esther Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture. Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation*, New York 2014, 72–82.

masses of ordinary Jews – became active participants in building Yiddish culture.

Dubnow's essay led not only to individual action but to the creation of an institutional base for Jewish scholarship. In 1892 the Hevrah Mefitse Haskalah (Society for the Spread of Enlightenment, also known by its Russian acronym OPE) founded a Historic-Ethnographic Commission, which in 1908 became the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society of St. Petersburg.¹¹ From 1909 to 1918, the society sponsored *Evreiskaia starina* (The Jewish Past), a journal of Russian Jewish history that Dubnow edited. Thus, Dubnow also paved the way for disseminating the fruits of Jewish research through academic publications, another central goal of YIVO's activity.

That research was itself deeply influenced by Dubnow's towering contributions to the field of Jewish historiography. In the prospectus for the Yiddish translation of his *World History of the Jewish People*, YIVO leaders described Dubnow's work as "new in spirit, synthesis, and methodology." Unlike earlier scholars, they wrote, Dubnow did not view the Jews as a "historical mummy" or a "religious tribe" but as a "living nation [...] S. Dubnow entirely secularizes Jewish history [and] sets it on a social base."¹² In contrast to the traditional focus on religious texts and great rabbinic scholars, both Dubnow and YIVO adopted a "social-economic" approach.¹³ This methodology stressed the experiences of average Jews rather than elites and everyday social conditions rather than intellectual achievements. It highlighted the agency of ordinary men and women as the fundamental actors of history, which in turn reinforced one of Dubnow's core principles: the ongoing vitality of the Jewish people in the face of antisemitism and assimilation.

The populist thrust of these ideas reflects the centrality of the folk for both Dubnow and YIVO. Their collection initiatives made ordinary Jews crucial to the creation of Jewish scholarship, while their research made the folk itself the subject of this scholarship. Finally, both wished their findings to be read far beyond the academy.¹⁴ Thus, just as YIVO planned books and journals intended for a wide audience, it described Dubnow's *World History* as

11 On the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society, see Mark W. Kiel, *A Twice Lost Legacy. Ideology, Culture, and the Pursuit of Jewish Folklore in Russia until Stalinization, 1930–1931* (unpublished PhD thesis, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York 1991), 393–446; and Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire*, Bloomington, Ind., 2009, 229–260.

12 RG 1.1, Folder 510, Velt-geshikhte fun yidishn folk in tsen bend [World History of the Jewish People in Ten Volumes], 1938, 6.

13 RG 82, Folder 2388, M[aks] Anin, Yidishe masn [Jewish Masses]; Simon Dubnow, Der itstiker tsushtand fun der yidisher historiografye [The Current State of Jewish Historiography], in: Yivo bleter [YIVO Pages] 8 (December 1935), no. 4, 290.

14 On YIVO's attitude towards the folk, see Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 5–8, 55–57, and passim. On its popular work, see *ibid.*, 90–99.

“a work that together with a purely *scholarly* character is also accessible to the broad circle of readers and will become a popular book in the true sense of the word.”¹⁵ By publishing Dubnow’s research as well as sponsoring its own, YIVO sought to fulfill Dubnow’s mandate of creating scholarship both “about the people and for the people.”¹⁶

Even as Dubnow’s commitment to the folk and his view of Jewish history as an ongoing narrative shaped his academic work, they also led to a deep engagement in contemporary issues. In practice this dual focus was not easy to maintain. Dubnow was often torn between the pull of his writing desk and the call to serve in the public arena, even as he stressed the boundary between scholarship and political ideology. In this respect, too, he served as a model for YIVO, as the institute sought to balance scholarly neutrality and communal relevance while avoiding overtly partisan stances.¹⁷ As Tcherikower put it, Dubnow’s work “connects the past with the problems of today,” thus blazing a path for younger scholars who were raised on his writing and “who feel closely connected to the national and social problems of modern Jewish life.”¹⁸

Thus as a role model, he continued, Dubnow was much more than an academic; he was also an organizer, teacher, political activist, and theoretician, driven “not so much by the urge of a researcher as by the passionate search for a new ideology.”¹⁹ This ideology was diaspora nationalism, which viewed Jews as a nation lacking a state and which fought for their rights as a minority group within the countries of Eastern Europe. Dubnow’s role as this movement’s leading thinker informed both the secular definition of Jewish peoplehood and the theories of Jewish history that underlay his academic work. Moreover, his principle that “the general Jewish national idea is based on historical consciousness”²⁰ made scholarship – in particular historical scholarship – a cornerstone of Jewish identity in the diaspora.

In the years after World War I, Dubnow’s proposals for government support of national minorities’ educational and cultural institutions were enshrined – albeit in a much diluted form – in the Minorities Treaties signed

15 RG 1.1, Folder 510, Velt-ghshikhte fun yidishn folk in tsen bend, 1938, 5 (emphasis here and below in the original).

16 Cit. in Benjamin Nathans, *On Russian-Jewish Historiography*, in: Thomas Sanders (ed.), *Historiography of Imperial Russia. The Profession and Writing of History in a Multinational State*, Armonk, N. Y., 1999, 415.

17 On this tension in YIVO’s work, see Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 99–104.

18 Tcherikower (ed.), *Historishe shriftn*, vol. 2, xiv.

19 *Ibid.*, xiii.

20 Cit. in Isaiah Trunk, *Historians of Russian Jewry*, in: Jacob Frumkin/Gregor Aronson/Alexis Goldenweiser, *Russian Jewry (1860–1917)*, New York 1966, 467.

by Poland and other countries of the region. In the interwar period, these provisions enabled YIVO's founders to envision building a national culture in the Yiddish language in the absence of a state. Thus, while Dubnow's historical methodology inspired YIVO's scholarship, his political theories allowed YIVO to be seen as much more than a modest research center. Supporters described it as a national institution for a people in diaspora, what Zalman Reisen called "the intellectual ingathering of the exiles for the international Yiddish nation."²¹

The bonds linking Dubnow to YIVO encompassed not only his public career as a scholar and political theorist but a personal dimension as well. Dubnow's acquaintance with many of YIVO's future leaders predated the founding of the institute by more than a decade. As early as 1908, he heard fervent defenses of Yiddish in speeches by Nokhem Shtif, the linguist and literary scholar who would later formulate the first detailed plan for a Yiddish academic institute. The two also worked together in the Folkspartey (People's Party), a political party based on Dubnow's diaspora nationalist principles.²² At the time of the Russian Revolution, Dubnow was living in St. Petersburg alongside several of the institute's future leaders. These included Shtif; Zelig Kalmanovitch, a linguist who would become one of YIVO's main administrators and the editor of many of its publications; and Max Weinreich, a multifaceted scholar who would become YIVO's most important figure.

Together with many of his fellow Jewish intellectuals, Dubnow eventually fled war and hunger in Russia and settled in Berlin in September 1922. There he supported a project to document the recent waves of pogroms in Ukraine, a successor to Dubnow's own call of 1891. This effort was headed by Elias Tcherikower, the future head of YIVO's Historical Section, with the participation of Shtif and Lestschinsky.

Dubnow also knew Shtif and Kalmanovitch as the Yiddish translators of his *World History of the Jewish People*, work which they began as early as 1909 and continued in the 1920s.²³ Dubnow recalled quarreling with Shtif, whom he characterized as "hot-headed" and too enamored of his own Yiddish style.²⁴ By contrast, Lestschinsky and Tcherikower became some of his most frequent guests in Berlin, part of what Dubnow described as his "com-

21 Barikht fun der konferents fun dem yivo [Report of the YIVO Conference], Vilna 1930, 12.

22 Simon Dubnow, *Dos bukh fun mayn lebn* [The Book of My Life], 3 vols., Buenos Aires 1962–1963, here vol. 2, 89, 188, 244, and 247.

23 Zelig Kalmanovitch's Yiddish translations of the *World History* appeared in an abridged 4-volume edition in 1909 and a 10-volume edition in 1920. Shtif translated several volumes while living in Berlin from 1922 to 1926 which appeared beginning in 1923.

24 Dubnow, *Dos bukh fun mayn lebn*, vol. 3, 26.

pany of close friends.”²⁵ The three men visited each other often, spent Jewish holidays together, and took vacations with their wives and children where, as Tcherikower put it, “we lived like one family.”²⁶ Interestingly, both Lestschinsky and Tcherikower addressed the older Dubnow by the patronymic “Shimen Markovitch,” while Weinreich usually used the more deferential “Herr Professor Dubnow.”

Dubnow’s Role in YIVO’s Work

Given his longstanding relationships with these younger colleagues, as well as his central role in shaping the very idea of a Yiddish scholarly institute, YIVO’s founders looked to Dubnow as a key supporter of their work from the very start. When Shtif completed his memorandum “Vegn a yidishn akademishn institut” (On a Yiddish Academic Institute), which called for the creation of a body devoted to Yiddish scholarship, he could only afford to send a few copies to individuals who he felt would be sympathetic to his plan and whose help he considered crucial. One of these, not surprisingly, was his Berlin neighbor Dubnow.

Dubnow responded promptly after receiving the document in February 1925 (fig. 1). Yet if his support in principle could not be doubted, he was less than optimistic or forthcoming with practical aid. “You are not crazy, God forbid,” he wrote to Shtif, “or ‘crazy’ in the positive sense of a ‘man of the spirit.’” A Yiddish research institute is certainly necessary, Dubnow continued – adding that he preferred the term “research” to “academic” –, but after holding a meeting or conference in Berlin, what would follow?

“I am afraid that we will have a meeting and pass a few nice resolutions but nothing further will come of it. First one must find a wealthy man who will give several tens of thousands of dollars for the institute – we are, after all, a people of paupers and live from charity – and in the second and third year pray to God that he (the donor, that is to say) does not go bankrupt, as is the way with Jews, and along with himself bankrupt the institute.”

Dubnow concluded, “I see no material basis for such an undertaking.” He ended his letter by suggesting that Shtif approach younger colleagues to do the practical work of founding the new body he envisioned. “Keep me a mile from such projects,” he wrote, noting that he was busy with his own publica-

25 Ibid., 117.

26 Ibid., vol. 3, *passim*; RG 82, Folder 2140, Elias Tcherikower to Jacob Lestschinsky, 9 September 1928.

tions. "Later, when something concrete comes of the thought, you can still get me to do some work."²⁷

Dubnow gave a similarly cautious response a few months later to an invitation to head the fledgling institute's Historical Section. He agreed to endorse its work but protested that his full writing schedule precluded an active role:

"But dear brothers, don't draw me into the organizational work [...] [T]aking upon myself the supervision of your 'Historical Section' is completely impossible for me. I can only promise you that when the 'Writings of the Institute' will be published, I will gladly send an article along with other writers. I believe that you will find suitable people for the work among our friends from the younger generation."²⁸

Dubnow's cool response might be attributed to skepticism that the ambitious plans of the institute's founders could be realized. Yet after YIVO had been operating for nearly a decade, Dubnow still hesitated when asked to lend his name to a new initiative, the Aspirantur training program for students.²⁹

This ongoing reluctance to play a fuller role at the institute might seem surprising. But we should recall that at the time of YIVO's founding in 1925, the 65-year-old Dubnow was already an eminent scholar. Moreover, just at this point many of his major publication projects were coming to fruition. From 1925 to 1929, the first full edition of his *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes* (World History of the Jewish People) was published in Berlin. In addition, his *Toldot ha-Hasidut* (History of Hasidism) first appeared in 1929 to 1931 in Tel Aviv and his three-volume memoir *Kniga zhizni* (The Book of My Life) was published from 1934 to 1940 in Riga. Translations of his books were also appearing in various languages. Thus, for Dubnow YIVO's founding and development coincided with an intense period of composing, editing, and translating his most important works. It is perhaps understandable that he did not wish to take time away from these tasks to shoulder administrative duties that he felt should fall to younger scholars.

In fact, over the years the bulk of Dubnow's contacts with YIVO involved his publications. As promised, Dubnow did become a frequent contributor to YIVO's journals, while YIVO became the publisher of the Yiddish editions of many of his works. It published his *Geshikhte fun khasidizm* (History of Hasidism) in 1931 and 1933 in Kalmanovitch's translation, just as the books appeared for the first time in Hebrew. In 1931 the Kultur-lige (Culture League) published the first volume of a Yiddish translation of the

27 RG 82, Folder 2369, Simon Dubnow to Nokhem Shtif, 18 February 1925.

28 RG 82, Folder 2382, Simon Dubnow to Nokhem Shtif, 28 August 1925; RG 82, Folder 2390, Letter of Organizational Committee, 29 October 1925.

29 RG 1.1, Lithuanian addendum, Folder 15, Simon Dubnow to Executive Office, YIVO, 20 February 1934.

Veltgeshikhte fun yidishn folk (World History of the Jewish People), but by 1933 Dubnow complained that it would not continue because of the economic crisis in Poland.³⁰ In 1937 YIVO took over the project and completed the ten-volume set between 1938 and 1940.³¹ For his part, Dubnow expressed satisfaction at seeing his work in what he elsewhere termed “the YIVO language”³² after so many years of effort. As a token of support for the institute, he donated his honoraria for both publications back to YIVO.³³

Dubnow also inspired new works of scholarship such as the *Algemeyne entsiklopedye* (General Encyclopedia), a compendium of world knowledge in Yiddish that was conceived in 1930 in honor of his 70th birthday.³⁴ Also planned as a tribute on this occasion was the second volume of the Historical Section’s *Shriftn* (Writings), but it was delayed until his 75th birthday and only finally appeared in 1937.³⁵ In addition to a broad range of historical articles, this collection contained studies of Dubnow’s genealogy and material from his personal archive. Dubnow praised the 700-page publication as “the Eiffel Tower of our scholarly literature.” He also remarked with a note of competitiveness that “our book has a great deal more true scholarship” than a similar Hebrew volume he had just received from Jerusalem.³⁶

Although Dubnow declined to lead YIVO’s Historical Section, he did participate as a member and even hosted meetings in his Berlin apartment.³⁷ Early on he proposed a four-volume collection of historical documents that could be used as a textbook in Yiddish schools as well as a tool for self-study.³⁸ This project was in keeping with YIVO’s and Dubnow’s goal of pro-

30 RG 107, Collection of Letters, Simon Dubnow to Elias Tcherikower, 22 July 1933.

31 RG 82, Folder 2220, Protocol 159, Meeting of the Executive Office, 23 August 1934; RG 1.1, Folder 20, Dubnow to Executive Office, YIVO, 15 April 1937. Some volumes had been published previously.

32 RG 1.1, Lithuanian addendum, Folder 15, Simon Dubnow to Max Weinreich, 16 July 1934.

33 RG 1.1, Folder 20, Executive Office, YIVO to Simon Dubnow, 5 October 1930; RG 82, Folder 2220, Protocol 159, Meeting of the Executive Office, 23 August 1934.

34 On this project, see Barry Trachtenberg, *Di Algemeyne Entsiklopedye, the Holocaust, and the Changing Mission of Yiddish Scholarship*, in: *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5 (November 2006), no. 3, 285–300; and idem, *Jewish Universalism, the Yiddish Encyclopedia, and the Nazi Rise to Power*, in: Gennady Estraiikh/Mikhail Krutikov (eds.), *Yiddish in Weimar Berlin. At the Crossroads of Diaspora Politics and Culture*, London 2010, 195–214.

35 Sophie [Sophia] Dubnov-Erlich, *The Life and Work of S. M. Dubnov. Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish History*, Bloomington, Ind., 1991, 225.

36 RG 1.1, Folder 20, Simon Dubnow to YIVO, 3 June 1937. The Hebrew volume to which Dubnow referred is the *Sefer Klausner* (Tel Aviv 1937).

37 RG 82, Folder 2238, Minutes of meeting of the Historical Section, 10 November 1929; and RG 82, Folder 2239, Minutes of meeting of the Historical Section, 14 December [1929].

38 RG 82, Folder 2238, *A visnshaftleke historishe khrestomatye* [A Scholarly Historical Chrestomathy].

ducing work accessible to ordinary Jews, yet like many of the institute's plans for popular publications, it was never realized.³⁹

Dubnow also remained involved in the institute's overall affairs. In 1928 Weinreich, Tcherikower, and Lestschinsky paid a visit to Dubnow's home in Berlin to discuss YIVO's activities and efforts to raise money for its new Vilna headquarters.⁴⁰ When the Building Committee began fundraising, Dubnow agreed to take charge of soliciting donations in the German capital.⁴¹ As he suspected in 1925, the institute never did find the rich man who would underwrite its work. He noted a decade later that its woes continued even after it was well established. He lamented, "Our institute is now so famous throughout the world, but fame doesn't lead to wealth – the poverty remains. Where can one find a Jewish Carnegie or a Rockefeller for our YIVO?"⁴²

Despite its ongoing financial struggles, YIVO survived the economic collapse of the early 1930s and even expanded its work in the following years. One sign of its growth was the creation of its long planned educational division, the Aspirantur. As noted above, in 1934 Dubnow's initial reaction to the plan for this project was cool. Before it could go forward, he argued, it needed to be more fully developed. Would the Aspirantur offer the equivalent of graduate classes or internships in the YIVO collections?

"I could give a favorable answer to the proposal laid out in your letter dated 15 February if only the plan for the Aspirantur were clear to me. However, I do not find enough clarity in the communiqué of the Central Board. Preparing young scholars and researchers is certainly YIVO's most important task, but how this task should be realized is the essential question. Will you create special seminars led by experts, or just give young people the opportunity to work in your archives and library?"

Writing that "I cannot give you advice from far away," Dubnow nevertheless advised waiting to launch the initiative until there was a "concrete plan," all the while reaffirming his support in principle.⁴³

Six months later, Dubnow criticized the scope of the Aspirantur as too narrow, arguing that "we must clearly state: the end goal is a *hoykhshul* (col-

39 Several such works were realized in the late 1930s. Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 154–163.

40 Dubnow, *Dos bukh fun mayn lebn*, vol. 3, 86.

41 RG 1.1, Folder 7, Minutes of meeting of the Central Board, 6 November 1928; RG 82, Folder 2219, *Di bashlosn fun der baratung* [The Decisions Taken at the Meeting], 15–16 October 1928.

42 RG 1.1, Lithuanian addendum, Folder 15, Simon Dubnow to Zalman Reisen and Zelig Kalmanovitch, 8 December 1935.

43 RG 1.1, Lithuanian addendum, Folder 15, Simon Dubnow to Executive Office, YIVO, 20 February 1934; RG 82, Folder 2220, Protocol 159, Meeting of the Executive Office, 23 August 1934.

lege) for Yiddish scholarship at YIVO.”⁴⁴ This was the term YIVO leaders used for the teaching program they envisioned that would serve as the equivalent of a Yiddish university, albeit on a modest scale. Dubnow proposed beginning with a series of classes on various historical periods and fields of study. He offered to come to Vilna for a month or two to lead one of the “special seminars under the direction of experts” that he had earlier proposed, a promise that Reisen described as “laying the cornerstone of the Aspirantur.”⁴⁵ However, while Dubnow occasionally offered students advice and encouragement,⁴⁶ he never did fulfill his pledge to make an extended visit to YIVO.

The Move to Riga and Visits to Vilna

Nevertheless, in the mid- and late 1930s, Dubnow’s ties to YIVO grew closer. This change was sparked by Dubnow’s move from Berlin in 1933 following Hitler’s rise to power. He settled in Kaiserwald (Latvian Mežaparks) on the outskirts of Riga, relatively close to YIVO’s Vilna headquarters. Yet he soon began speaking of a move to Vilna itself, a possibility he considered for the remainder of his life. His ambivalence about remaining in Latvia was likely due to a rightwing coup in 1934 that led to the curtailment of Jewish cultural, political, and economic activity, as well as a sense of isolation following the death of his wife Ida early that year.⁴⁷ At the same time, the attraction of Vilna was largely due to the presence of the institute. He described the advantages of the city to the writer Daniel Charney:

“Living is cheap there, there is a good environment although a tragic one, a YIVO. A little bit of press [...] for the time being – the remnants of freedom of the press. Perhaps I will also be fated to settle in Vilna, but I will certainly visit there every year [...]”⁴⁸

44 RG 82, Folder 2220, Protocol 159, Meeting of the Executive Office, 23 August 1934.

45 RG 339, Papers of Jacob Lestschinsky, Folder 16, Simon Dubnow to Jacob and Leah [Lestschinsky], 26 September 1934 (for this letter, see also RG 87, Papers of Simon Dubnow, Folder 1040); RG 82, Folder 2220, Protocol 159, Meeting of the Executive Office, 23 August 1934.

46 RG 87, Folder 1040, Simon Dubnow to Jacob and Leah [Lestschinsky], 26 September 1934; RG 1.1, Folder 20, Simon Dubnow to YIVO, 28 June 1937; RG 1.1, Lithuanian addendum, Folder 15, YIVO to Simon Dubnow, 17 July 1940.

47 On Latvian Jewry in this period, see Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars*, Bloomington, Ind., 1987, 252f. On the death of Ida Dubnow, see Dubnov-Erlich, *The Life and Work of S. M. Dubnov*, 213–126.

48 RG 87, Folder 1039, Simon Dubnow to Daniel Charney, Erev yom kiper 5695 [18 September 1934].

Wishing to assess conditions in Poland and finally see YIVO firsthand, in August 1934 Dubnow paid his first visit to Vilna in nearly thirty years. As he wrote to Weinreich, he planned "to converse with you about our business and to get to know our institute."⁴⁹ In welcoming Dubnow to YIVO, Reisen expressed satisfaction that "the distinguished guest has the chance to see with his own eyes the institute and its work."⁵⁰ As with many other visitors in this period, Dubnow noted Vilna's vibrant cultural life despite dire economic conditions, especially in the field of education. Dubnow summed up his impressions in a letter to Lestschinsky (fig. 2–3):

"In general I am happy with my trip to Poland: I saw not only family and old friends but also observed a world that I left 28 years ago (when I moved from Vilna to Saint Petersburg). Of course, I saw more 'society' than common people. Enough troubles and worries, but also activity, readiness for struggle, often self-sacrifice (as in the school movement). In Vilna I visited almost all the schools of all types and saw how, amidst terrible poverty, they drag the little children out of the mud and transform them into civilized human beings."⁵¹

His reaction to what he saw at YIVO, however, was mixed. He expressed both support for and reservations about the Aspirantur. He criticized YIVO's World Convention planned for 1935 as "too grandiose" and poorly timed.⁵² Moreover, at a meeting of the Executive Office, he reported asking local activists why other Vilna cultural institutions, such as the An-sky Museum and the Strashun Library, did not merge with YIVO.⁵³ Dubnow reported that they had blamed "the one-sided, partisan attitude of the YIVO board, where anti-Zionism and anti-Hebraism reign." Dubnow stressed that "neutrality in social questions is after all the holiest principle of scholarship." While he knew that YIVO did adhere to this principle, he argued, it needed to do more to show opponents that their charges were unfounded. Dubnow later wrote to Lestschinsky:

"YIVO is also an island of culture in a sea of troubles, but in Vilna it does not have the good reputation that it has everywhere else: it is considered a partisan institution, and I raised the question of how to attract support from all directions so that the institute

49 RG 1.1, Lithuanian addendum, Folder 15, Simon Dubnow to Max Weinreich, 16 July 1934.

50 RG 82, Folder 2220, Protocol 159, Meeting of the Executive Office, 23 August 1934.

51 RG 339, Folder 16, Simon Dubnow to Jacob and Leah [Lestschinsky], 26 September 1934.

52 RG 82, Folder 2220, Protocol 159, Meeting of the Executive Office, 23 August 1934.

53 On the An-sky Vilna Historic-Ethnographic Society, known colloquially as the An-sky Museum, see Cecile E. Kuznitz, *An-Sky's Legacy. The Vilna Historic-Ethnographic Society and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Culture*, in: Gabriella Safran/Steven J. Zipperstein (eds.), *The Worlds of S. An-sky. A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century*, Stanford, Calif., 2006, 320–345.

would become an institution of the people in the diaspora like the ‘faithful house’ in the Land of Israel.”⁵⁴

For their part the YIVO leaders in attendance explained that “fanatical or biased persons among the Vilna activists always sought to slander the institute” by spreading such groundless accusations, thus preventing YIVO from broadening its base of support.⁵⁵

In fact, charges of partisanship had dodged the institute from its earliest days. Zionists and Orthodox Jews complained of its supposed Yiddishist, secularist outlook, even as members of leftwing political parties pressed it to embrace socialism. Such conflicts were more pronounced in the highly politicized environment of Warsaw than in Vilna. Moreover, they intensified in the mid-1930s, as the Depression and the rise of fascism led to growing polarization within Jewish society. In response, YIVO leaders only reaffirmed their commitment to Dubnow’s principle of objective scholarship.⁵⁶ Living in Berlin until 1933 and a quiet Riga suburb thereafter, Dubnow was at a remove from the ideological conflicts engulfing East European Jewry. This perhaps explains his surprise at their intensity and the extent to which they impinged on YIVO’s work.

Dubnow’s experiences during his visit led him to reconsider making his home in Vilna: “As for moving to Poland permanently, that is something I’ll have to ponder much more. This would alter my entire plan for the last phase of my life, which I want to devote to quiet introspection.”⁵⁷ At the end of the year he was still undecided, writing to colleagues that he would delay a decision until the following spring or summer. He also considered Warsaw, where his daughter Sophia Dubnow-Erlich resided with her husband Henryk Erlich, a leader of the socialist diaspora nationalist Jewish Labor Bund, and two sons.⁵⁸ In January 1935, he was still weighing his options:

“And yet a center must be created in *Vilna*, primarily around YIVO. [...] Vilna is, after all, the last chance to avoid boiling in the Warsaw cauldron. True, all around there is

54 RG 339, Folder 16, Simon Dubnow to Jacob and Leah [Lestschinsky], 26 September 1934. The phrase *bayis ne’eman* (faithful house) is used to refer to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, but here apparently refers to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

55 RG 82, Folder 2220, Protocol 159, Meeting of the Executive Office, 23 August 1934.

56 On these tensions in YIVO’s work, see Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 99–109. On their escalation in the mid- and late 1930s, see *ibid.*, 142 f. and 146–149.

57 RG 339, Folder 16, Simon Dubnow to Jacob and Leah [Lestschinsky], 26 September 1934.

58 Simon Dubnow to Yehoshua Khana Ravnitzky, 5 December 1934, in: Simon Dubnow in Memoriam, *Essays [on Dubnow by Various Authors] and Letters*, ed. by Simon Rawidowicz, London/Jerusalem/Waltham, Mass., 1954, 321 f.; Simon Dubnow to Yosef Meisl, 26 November 1934, in: *ibid.*, 371 f.

bitter need, but one can still find a quiet corner. Life is cheap, there are enough friends, and more idealism than in other cities. [...] I am still wavering between Otwock and Vilna, between my daughter's family and the YIVO family."⁵⁹

Dubnow enjoyed taking walks among nature and sought a peaceful working environment. Thus it is not surprising that he mentioned the resort town of Otwock outside of Warsaw as a possible destination rather than the bustling capital itself. Similarly, in Vilna Dubnow eschewed the picturesque yet crowded and dilapidated Jewish quarter. Instead, he sought "a warm little corner in that Vilna that is far from Yatkever Street [in the Jewish quarter] and is surrounded by the most beautiful landscapes [...]."⁶⁰ He inquired whether he could find "good European apartments" in the wooded area of Zakret to the west of the city center.⁶¹ Yet in March 1935, he wrote that he had given up his plan to move to Poland.⁶² Discouraged by the rancor he had observed in Vilna and perhaps wary of being drawn too much into YIVO's day-to-day activities, he chose to remain in the leafy Riga suburb of Kaiserwald where he could pursue his writing in relative tranquility.⁶³

Dubnow's impressions of the contentious atmosphere around YIVO were confirmed when he returned in August 1935 to participate in the institute's World Convention. With the growing threat of fascism and the formation of the Popular Front earlier that year, leftwing delegates became ever more vocal in their calls for YIVO to become politically engaged and to embrace what the Bundist Jacob Patt called "the *shkhine* [divine light] of socialism."⁶⁴

Dubnow used his two speeches at the convention to reaffirm the core principles behind his – and the institute's – work. At the festive opening session, "the full-packed room greeted S. Dubnow with great and prolonged ovations." He began his address by noting the political, economic, and moral crisis unfolding in Europe. In such dire times, he asserted, "when social science is falsified for partisan dogmatics and partisan dictatorship [...] our duty is to raise up the flag of honest pure scholarship [...]." After all, he continued, one does not stop studying geology during an earthquake.⁶⁵ Noting that the Hebrew University was also then celebrating its tenth anniversary, Dubnow described a "cultural dualism" that embraced work in both Hebrew

59 RG 87, Folder 1039, Simon Dubnow to Daniel Charney, 27 January 1935 (emphasis underlined in the original).

60 Ibid., Simon Dubnow to Daniel and Khaye [Charney], 3 January 1935.

61 Ibid., Simon Dubnow to Daniel Charney, 27 January 1935.

62 Ibid., Simon Dubnow to Daniel Charney, 12 March 1935.

63 Dubnov-Erlich, *The Life and Work of S. M. Dubnov*, 216.

64 *Der alvettlekher tsuzamenfor fun yidishn visnshaflekh'n institut* [The World Convention of the Yiddish Scientific Institute], Vilna 1936, 121.

65 Ibid., 14.

and Yiddish, carried out in both “the Jerusalem of the Land of Israel” and “the Jerusalem of the diaspora.” Such a pluralistic dynamic, he continued, had characterized Jewish society since ancient times.⁶⁶

In a separate talk Dubnow traced the development of Jewish historiography from its roots to the current “social and social-economic” approach that treated the Jewish people as a “living nation.”⁶⁷ He compared recent Zionist scholarship, intended only for specialists, with YIVO’s publications “for every thinking person who is interested in contemporary and historical problems.”⁶⁸ Yet while he reiterated the importance of work for a broad audience, he also stressed the boundary between communal engagement and political advocacy. He praised the research of some younger historians associated with YIVO such as Emanuel Ringelblum and Philip Friedman, but explicitly rejected the Marxist approach of historical materialism. The goal of scholarly inquiry, he again emphasized, must be to depict events “how they truly were [...] not to create puppets for this or that ideology a priori. The ideology must be the a posteriori result of historical research [...]”⁶⁹

At the conference and elsewhere, YIVO leaders including Weinreich, Kalmanovitch, and Lestschinsky reiterated their support for Dubnow’s convictions. Yet such pronouncements did little to convince his critics, almost all of whom, not coincidentally, hailed from Warsaw. The Marxist historian Raphael Mahler insisted that all scholarship inevitably bore the imprint of class. And after Dubnow spoke of “cultural dualism,” the school activist Shloyme Mendelsohn stated that “today is such a time when dualism is our great enemy.”⁷⁰ Meanwhile, as socialists opposed him from the left, his close colleagues and protégés Tcherikower and Kalmanovitch were questioning Dubnow’s continued faith in secularism and liberal democracy.⁷¹

While events at YIVO revealed the divisions within Jewish society, Dubnow also had a disturbing experience with local antisemitism. Following the convention, together with Daniel Charney, the artist Marc Chagall and his wife Bella, and others he visited a children’s home outside Vilna run by the public health organization TOZ. During a ferry ride they encountered a

66 Ibid., 15. Contrast these statements with a recent scholar’s conclusion that throughout his life Dubnow “continued to portray Diaspora nationalism and Zionism as a dichotomous choice.” Simon Rabinovitch, *The Dawn of a New Diaspora. Simon Dubnov’s Autonomism, from St. Petersburg to Berlin*, in: *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book 50 (2005)*, 267–288, here 286.

67 Dubnow, *Der itstiker tsushtand fun der yidisher historiografye*, 290.

68 Ibid., 293.

69 Ibid., 293 f.

70 *Der alvettlekher tsuzamenfor fun yidishn visnshaftlekhn institut*, 91.

71 Joshua M. Karlip, *The Tragedy of a Generation. The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism in Eastern Europe*, Cambridge, Mass., 2013, 201–218.

group of students who harassed the Jewish passengers and forced them to disembark. This incident further disillusioned Dubnow about conditions in Poland.⁷² He wrote to the scholar Simon Rawidowicz,

"This summer I was in Vilna, which is the opposite of a restful place; the noise of political parties and their quarrels, dreadful material poverty and spiritual sickness. In such an environment I could not establish my residence unless my daughter and her family forcefully demanded it of me."

Instead, he concluded, he had "decided to remain in the quiet wooded area" of his home on the outskirts of Riga.⁷³

The Years of World War II

Dubnow's plans for a tranquil old age were shattered with the outbreak of World War II. The historian in Riga and the institute in Vilna found their fates intertwined, yet both were temporarily shielded from the war's full impact. Soviet troops entered Vilna on 19 September 1939 and turned the city over to Lithuanian authorities before withdrawing a month later. Both Latvia and Lithuania then remained independent until June 1940, creating a seeming oasis amidst the international crisis. With the outbreak of hostilities, friends admonished Dubnow to leave for America, but he felt that the officially neutral Baltic countries would provide a safe haven. Although he was able to secure an American visa, Dubnow refused offers to go to the United States as well as to Palestine.⁷⁴

Just as he decided to remain in Riga, Dubnow expressed the hope that YIVO would not abandon Vilna. He reacted to a report that Weinreich planned to visit the United States: "That's good, but he must not go in order to settle down there. We must fight as long as possible. We must not give up our last scholarly position in Eastern Europe," Dubnow wrote to Kalmanovitch in January 1940. "YIVO must remain a fortress for free critical scholarship." He urged the institute to work to legitimate itself under the new regime by adding legal experts with a good knowledge of Lithuanian to its management, to resist pressure from Orthodox leaders "to return Vilna to

72 Dubnov-Erich, *The Life and Work of S. M. Dubnov*, 223.

73 Simon Dubnow to Simon Rawidowicz, 8 October 1935, in: *Simon Dubnow in Memoriam*, 446.

74 RG 1.1, Folder 641, Simon Dubnow to Zelig Kalmanovitch, 30 January 1940; RG 87, Folder 1040, Simon Dubnow to Jewish National Workers' Alliance, published in: *Yidisher kemfer [Jewish Fighter]*, (New York), 16 February 1940 (copy).

the eighteenth century,” and to make use of the refugee intellectuals who had arrived from Poland.⁷⁵

Among these refugees were his daughter Sophia Dubnow-Erlich and her sons Victor and Alexander Erlich, who had fled Warsaw at the outbreak of the war. Dubnow’s grandsons enrolled as students at YIVO while the family sought news of Henryk Erlich, who had been arrested by the Soviets. Dubnow spoke again at this time of moving to Lithuania: “I still think about settling in Vilna, although I understand that there are many quieter places for me in the world (apart from America I have been invited to go to the Land of Israel).”⁷⁶ The presence of his family was certainly one attraction. The other, of course, was the presence of YIVO as he expressed “the hope that in Vilna I could be of help in restoring the institute.”⁷⁷

According to his daughter, “Gradually Lithuania began to assume the character of the promised land in Dubnow’s imagination, a land where the fulfillment of his secret wishes awaited – a family circle, association with kindred spirits, permanent work at YIVO.”⁷⁸ As he wrote shortly after the start of the war, “The only ray of light in the darkness is Lithuanian Vilna.”⁷⁹ In early 1940 he even encouraged friends abroad to settle in the city.⁸⁰ He wrote to Daniel Charney,

“Why wouldn’t it be our fate to meet again in Lithuanian Vilna? Of course America is quieter, but we have no right to abandon the Old World as long as the danger is distant and we can perhaps avoid it entirely. I share with you the hope that we will all still return to the granny Jerusalem of Lithuania.”⁸¹

He noted in a letter to Tcherikower that his own plans were linked to the institute’s fate: “If it is not calm in Vilna and they drag YIVO to America, I’ll settle in Kaunas in June or July – a different temptation.”⁸² Yet he clearly leaned towards the former city, hoping optimistically for the continuation of YIVO’s work there. He explained his decision to decline an American visa by stating his intention of “moving to Vilna in order to help with the restoration of our Yiddish Scientific Institute, which has suffered badly from the

75 RG 1.1, Folder 641, Simon Dubnow to Zelig Kalmanovitch, 30 January 1940. His disparaging reference to Orthodox Jews was likely based on his experiences in Latvia, where the Orthodox political party Agudas Israel obtained a virtual monopoly on Jewish life following the 1934 coup.

76 Ibid.

77 Simon Dubnow to Elias Tcherikower, 18 December 1939, cit. in Dubnow-Erlich, *The Life and Work of S. M. Dubnov*, 238.

78 Ibid., 239.

79 Simon Dubnow to Aron Steinberg, cit. in *ibid.*, 237.

80 RG 1.1, Folder 641, Simon Dubnow to Zelig Kalmanovitch, 30 January 1940.

81 RG 87, Folder 1039, Simon Dubnow to Daniel Charney, 12 February 1940.

82 RG 107, Simon Dubnow to Elias Tcherikower, 13 March 1940.

war, especially from the destruction of Poland. I propose to do this in the coming spring, when Vilna will be a bit quieter."⁸³

Still Dubnow wavered. In April 1940 he visited both Lithuanian cities in order to visit his family and assess his options.⁸⁴ At YIVO he attended the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the death of the classical Yiddish writer Isaac Leib Peretz. He also took part in a meeting of the Aspirantur where he offered students advice on their research topics. He told those assembled, "It gives me great joy, at a time when the world is being destroyed, to come to a corner where a world is being born. Scholarship creates light in a dark world."⁸⁵

In May Dubnow was still vacillating between Vilna and Kaunas.⁸⁶ Yet the point was soon rendered moot as the Russian army invaded the Baltics in June 1940. Now both he and YIVO found themselves under Soviet rule.⁸⁷ The following month he sent a carefully worded letter to Kalmanovitch, YIVO's only remaining pre-war leader in Vilna now that Reisen had been arrested and Weinreich had reached New York. First of all, he asked that honoraria owed to him be paid to his daughter, adding that he hoped this request would be honored by "new colleagues" even "if changes took place in YIVO's management." He wrote of his desire to see the latest volume of his *World History* appear in print. "After all," he noted, "my historical work is cited even in Soviet college history textbooks." He continued:

"I very much want to know what is happening at YIVO. As a member of the honorary presidium of the Curatorium, I can't imagine that the new management would greatly change the work of our institute, which fulfills the requirements of the most modern scholarship. The research work and the Aspirantur must continue in Vilna, our old intellectual center with its youth greatly thirsting for knowledge.

Convey the content of my letter to our colleagues and write me about everything of interest to us, the founders of YIVO."⁸⁸

Yet there seems to have been a break in communication after this point. In March 1941, Dubnow sent a letter to Weinreich complaining that he had

83 RG 87, Folder 1040, Simon Dubnow to Jewish National Workers' Alliance.

84 RG 107, Simon Dubnow to Elias Tcherikower, 13 March 1940.

85 RG 1.3, Folder 4056, Fayerlekhe zitsung mitn onteyl fun prof. dubnov, 25 April 1940.

86 Simon Dubnow to Yehoshua Khana Ravnitzky, 20 May 1940, in: Simon Dubnow in Memoriam, 330f.

87 Sophia Dubnow-Erich writes that his desire to move to Vilna was thwarted by a sealed border between the two new Soviet Republics. Yet it seems more likely that as a staunch opponent of the Bolsheviks Dubnow thought it best to remain quietly in the Riga suburbs, or that in the end the aged historian simply found the prospect of a move too daunting. Idem, *The Life and Work of S. M. Dubnov*, 242. I thank David E. Fishman for his thoughts on this point.

88 RG 1.1, Lithuanian addendum, Folder 15, Simon Dubnow to Zelig Kalmanovitch, 17 July 1940.

received no news in ten months (fig. 4). By that time Weinreich was carrying on YIVO's scholarly work as head of its New York office. Dubnow now recognized that "the YIVO in America [...] has changed from merely a branch to the central headquarters." He asked about Sophia and her sons, about Weinreich's own family, and about mutual friends such as the Tcherikowers. "We wonder why they don't write to us here when letters often arrive from America, albeit with a delay. For us, cut off from family and friends in the war-torn lands, it would simply be a joy."⁸⁹

Weinreich replied promptly, assuring Dubnow that he had not been forgotten, that colleagues in New York often mentioned his name. He informed the elderly historian that his family was in Japan awaiting transit across the Pacific. He described the whereabouts of various acquaintances as well as his own life in the United States. And he wrote that Yiddish scholarship was continuing in America, that a new volume of the *Algemeyne Entsiklopedye* created in Dubnow's honor had just been published. Weinreich concluded,

"All in all it is perhaps not so joyful here – where can one find joy these days – but there are possibilities for scholarly work, and there are also people with whom to work. We often think, if our grandfather Reb Shimen [Dubnow] were here with us, our mood would be much different. What do you think, could we convince him to get on his way? In the end it is difficult to get oneself up; then one moves of one's own accord. And there's no worry about a visa; after all there was one once already and we can certainly easily work it out."⁹⁰

But this was not to be. Dubnow never received Weinreich's reply. By July 1941 the Nazis occupied both Lithuania and Latvia. By the end of the year, Dubnow had been murdered in the Riga Ghetto and the Nazis were making plans to liquidate the YIVO collections in Vilna.

Conclusion

In myriad ways Dubnow's career inspired YIVO's leaders and supporters as they sought to develop Yiddish scholarship in interwar Eastern Europe. For his part, Dubnow spoke warmly of YIVO and of his desire to assist in its work. After he left Berlin in 1933, he often asserted his intention to spend time at the institute and perhaps to settle near its Vilna headquarters. Yet many of Dubnow's promises went unfulfilled, and in the end he made only three brief visits to see YIVO's activities firsthand.

89 RG 107, Simon Dubnow to Max Weinreich, 5 March 1941 (for this letter, see also RG 87, Folder 1038).

90 RG 107, Max Weinreich to Simon Dubnow, 6 April 1941.

Throughout his life, Dubnow combined his scholarship with an ongoing engagement in social and political issues. He bequeathed this dual mission to YIVO, as both the individual and the institution always struggled to balance these competing demands. Yet it was this very tension that held Dubnow back from a more active role at the institute. Anxious to complete the writing projects to which he planned to devote the last stage of his life, Dubnow resisted the temptation of greater proximity to YIVO. It seems he feared being drawn increasingly away from his study and into its day-to-day work.

Dubnow advocated building a modern, secular culture as a foundation of Jewish identity in the diaspora. In the interwar period, diaspora nationalists often viewed the array of Yiddish language institutions in Vilna, with YIVO at its apex, as the most complete fulfillment of Dubnow's vision.⁹¹ Yet on his visits to the city the scholar came face to face with a difficult truth. By the mid-1930s, worsening political and economic conditions and the resultant polarization of Jewish life made such a vision increasingly difficult to sustain. Dismayed by what he saw at YIVO, despite his concern for the institute Dubnow was perhaps reluctant to confront on a daily basis the distance between current realities and his ideal of what diaspora nationalism could achieve.

In the face of such rising tensions, Dubnow redoubled his insistence that academic work must not succumb to political pressures but remain apart from ideology. In this as in so much else, YIVO followed Dubnow's lead, steadfastly defending this principle in the face of both internal and external criticism. In the end, the force of world events proved more than either could withstand. Until his death Dubnow maintained his commitment to Eastern Europe, even as YIVO relocated its center to New York and continued the work of Yiddish scholarship to which Simon Dubnow contributed so much.

91 On the image of Vilna and YIVO's relationship to the city, see Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, 135–139.

Appendix

Seven Letters of Simon Dubnow Concerning His Relationship to the
Yiddish Scientific Institute, Selected and Annotated by Cecile E.
Kuznitz, and Transl. from the Yiddish by Vera Szabó

Grünewald, 18 February 1925 (fig. 1)

Dear Esteemed Colleague N. Shtif,¹

Among piles of manuscripts and proofs I received today your “composition,” as you call your memorandum, and I read it immediately – what can I do if you have this effect on me? What can I say – you are not crazy, God forbid, or “crazy” in the positive sense of a “man of the spirit.” Such a research institute is necessary – this is what I would call it rather than an “academic institute” – but where, who and what? We can organize a meeting in Berlin, a convention – a bit more difficult but it certainly seems possible. But what then? I am afraid that we will have a meeting and pass a few nice resolutions but nothing further will come of it. First one must find a wealthy man who will give several tens of thousands of dollars for the institute – we are, after all, a people of paupers and live from charity – and in the second and third year pray to God that he (the donor, that is to say) does not go bankrupt, as is the way with Jews, and along with himself bankrupt the institute.

I see no material basis for such an undertaking. But I can tell you now that I am absolutely the wrong one to consult. A liquidator cannot be an organizer, he might destroy things, discourage people. Keep me a mile from such projects. You should have a meeting with other younger colleagues who still have time for organizational tasks. Later, when something concrete comes of the thought, you can still get me to do some work.

And here is the answer to your three questions. I have to end; it is very late, and there are piles of proofs and unsent manuscripts on my desk that must be sent tomorrow to the printing house; if not, there will be a hue and cry. Please forgive me.

Best wishes and kind regards,
S. Dubnow

1 Nokhem Shtif, a linguist and literary scholar, was the founder of YIVO as well as a Yiddish translator of Dubnow’s *World History of the Jewish People*.

Prof. S. Dubnow
Riga

Riga, 20 February 1934
Meža prospect 68
Tel.: 36177.

To the Executive Office of YIVO, Vilna

Esteemed Friends,

I could give a favorable answer to the proposal laid out in your letter dated 15 February if only the plan for the Aspirantur were clear to me. However, I do not find enough clarity in the communiqué of the Central Board. Preparing young scholars and researchers is certainly YIVO's most important task, but how this task should be realized is the essential question. Will you create special seminars led by experts, or just give young people the opportunity to work in your archives and library? In such a small center as Vilna this question must be clarified before the new Aspirantur in honor of our celebrated Dr. Szabad² is announced, because if, God forbid, the Aspirantur falls through, our reputation will suffer. I cannot give you advice from far away. I just want to see a clear plan, and then I will be ready and willing to give my name to this fine undertaking.

Until things become concrete it might be better not to assign titles but write simply that S. Dubnow also promised his contribution. In any case, you have my promise *in principle*.³

Cordial regards and best wishes,
S. Dubnow

- 2 Dr. Tsemakh Szabad was an important communal leader and benefactor of YIVO in Vilna as well as a highly respected medical doctor. The creation of the Aspirantur, which was named in his honor, was planned to coincide with Szabad's 70th birthday.
- 3 Emphasis underlined in the original.

Riga, 26 September 1934 (fig. 2–3)

My Dear Friends Jacob and Leah [Lestschinsky]!⁴

Finally a letter from you, although still with a *poste restante* address. I had received your Rosh Hashanah card earlier and I am sending you back a pack of blessings for the New Year, above all that you stop being wanderers. Kashdan⁵ wrote me from Marienbad that you decided to settle down in Prague. You, however, have not mentioned anything about it, so you must still be hesitating. I can't give you advice from far away. I don't know your motives, but you must settle on some decision, because living like a nomad destroys the soul and makes you lose balance. You have heard a lot about me, as you write. In general I am happy with my trip to Poland: I saw not only family and old friends but also observed a world that I left 28 years ago (when I moved from Vilna to Saint Petersburg). Of course, I saw more "society" than common people. Enough troubles and worries, but also activity, readiness for struggle, often self-sacrifice (as in the school movement). In Vilna I visited almost all the schools of all types and saw how, amidst terrible poverty, they drag the little children out of the mud and transform them into civilized human beings. YIVO is also an island of culture in a sea of troubles, but in Vilna it does not have the good reputation that it has everywhere else: it is considered a partisan institution, and I raised the question of how to attract support from all directions so that the institute would become an institution of the people in the diaspora like the "faithful home"⁶ in the Land of Israel. I also suggested the creation of research seminars at the institute led by experts and I promised that I myself would come for a month or two every year and lead a historical seminar.

My own plans are still unclear: for the winter I will definitely stay here in Kaiserwald, for now in my old apartment, just me and a maid; but maintaining a separate household is not worthwhile, and settling in the future Kazhdan guest house is also a risk. Will it really be established and kept up for a while? This winter I will probably stay in my apartment: I have to finish the second volume of my memoirs, and this can be done only in the quiet of Kaiserwald. As for moving to Poland permanently, that is something I'll have to ponder much more. It would alter my entire plan for the last phase of my life, which I want to devote to quiet introspection.

4 The letter is to Jacob Lestschinsky, the head of YIVO's Economic-Statistical Section, and his wife Leah.

5 It is unclear who is meant here.

6 The phrase *bayis ne'eman* (faithful house) is used to refer to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, but here apparently refers to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

RIGA 26. IX. 1934 4

מיין טעג פונען יעדן און לאה!

אנדערשט זען אונדז אונדז ביינו, באשע נאך אלץ מיט א פאסט-טעג-
 טאג אדרשט. און דאס נאך פונעם נאכטן איז נאכט צו דאס בילד און שיי און
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 אוי און שייט נע וועגן דעם-אמעס וועלט איז פון נאך און פונעם און פונעם
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Fig. 2-3: Simon Dubnow to Jacob and Leah [Lestschinsky], 26 September 1934. © Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York (RG 339, Folder 16).

True, not far from here things are not that quiet, either. The spirit of fascism is stronger by the day. The principle of “Latvia for the Latvians” is about to be realized. The education system is really a catastrophe: the new person overseeing Jewish school affairs at the Ministry of Education is a hard line Agudist.⁷ All the young teachers are being fired and replaced by yeshiva students with beard and *peyes* [sidelocks]. There is an outcry, and people come to me with their troubles. But it’s impossible to speak up here, because other than the Agudah oriented *Haynt* there is no other Jewish press. Our only hope to utter a free word is abroad, and it is our duty to do that.

Well, let this be enough for today. Please answer *this*⁸ letter immediately just so I know you received it and it hasn’t gotten lost. And please, do write more clearly about your plans. I received from YIVO your book that was published at the time of the conference. It is a much needed work. There is trouble with my three-volume *History*: Steinberg⁹ stopped “and left off bearing.”¹⁰ Thus the work cannot be published in the German original, and the publishing houses are waiting for the translation in vain.

Be well and cheerful both of you, but especially you, dear Leah, who sounded so sad in your postcard last summer. If it’s not too difficult, live with the hope that things will improve. Greetings to Taybele.¹¹

Yours, with my full heart,
S. Dubnow

27 January 1935

My Dear Friend, Daniel the Precious Man!¹²

I was deeply touched by your dear letter dated the 15th. You have a fine talent for memoir writing, and, although our writing methods differ, I am sure that your memoirs will also provide historical material regarding the characteristics of the period, just like mine. I say this before receiving your

7 The reference here is to the Orthodox political party Agudas Israel.

8 Emphasis underlined in the original.

9 The Russian and Yiddish writer Aron Steinberg translated several of Dubnow’s works.

10 The phrase used here is a slightly altered quote from Genesis 29:32. It refers in the Bible to the matriarch Leah ceasing to bear children and here to Steinberg ceasing to work on Dubnow’s *History*.

11 This presumably refers to their daughter.

12 The letter is to Daniel Charney, the Yiddish poet and journalist. The Hebrew phrase *ish khamudes* (Precious Man) comes from the Book of Daniel (see Daniel 10:11) and is a common way of referring to the Biblical figure in rabbinic literature.

book,¹³ which I hope will arrive shortly, because I remember the chapters you had published earlier. I cannot forget the images of the "conspiratorial" meetings that took place in the forest near a shtetl. That's not *belles lettres* – that's life itself! May you be healthy and at peace in Vilna so that you can write more. I think highly of your journalistic writing, too, in the Börne-Heine genre, and it is quite regrettable that you don't have a large newspaper in which to publish your pieces. Still, health is the most important thing; it upsets me that you lie in bed sick, probably on account of the cold winter. Now it is getting warmer, and you must recover your health.

I am still affected by the death of our [Tsemakh] Szabad. It's a pity that you did not have the opportunity to get to know well his fine, gentle character, his heart that was always filled with worry and concern for the troubles of the Jewish people and an urge to do something about it, to help, to organize. It is hard to imagine Vilna without Szabad.

And yet a center must be created in *Vilna*,¹⁴ primarily around YIVO.

I understand from your letter that you are close to settled, that you rented an apartment in the nicest area, near Zakret. But Rozenboym¹⁵ came to visit me recently and said that your [wife] Khayele wrote something about a change in your plans. Why? Vilna is, after all, the last chance to avoid boiling in the Warsaw cauldron. True, all around there is bitter need, but one can still find a quiet corner. Life is cheap, there are enough friends, and more idealism than in other cities. I look to you as my advance guard. I am still wavering between Otwock and Vilna, between my daughter's family and the YIVO family. I am expecting from you accurate news about life in Vilna with all the details, and especially if I would be able to hide out there as I can here in Kaiserwald. I know that there is nothing of this sort over there, that you cannot live any farther out than Zakret, but are there any good European apartments there? I remember Pohulanka and Zakret from 28 years ago. Last summer, when I spent a week in Vilna, they didn't even let me visit Zakret.

Write me about how things are going with obtaining your formal right of residence in Poland. Are they making things difficult for you? Are you sure you will be able to extend your residence permit? It seems to me that Poland is more tolerant in this respect than other countries. You still have some remnants of freedom of the press, too, and we here envy "you" for that. But what will happen in the future? This cannot be predicted for many countries.

13 In the typed version of the letter that Charney donated to YIVO, he added in parentheses that the book referred to is *Barg aroyf* (Uphill), Warsaw: Literarische bleter, 1935.

14 Emphasis underlined in the original.

15 It is unclear who is meant here.

Here in my quiet and solitude I am now in the last phase of editing the second volume of my memoirs. In a few days I will send it to the printing press and then the process of proofreading will begin that will drag on for several months. I am not entirely alone, though. Friends come to visit me occasionally. In fact, some guests have just left: Levitas, Dr. Hertsfeld,¹⁶ and several ladies.

Be well and cheerful, and give my regards to all our friends.

Yours lovingly,
S. Dubnow

30 January 1940

Mr. Z. Kalmanovitch¹⁷
YIVO, Vilna

My Dear Friend,

Thank you for your detailed letter dated the 15th of January regarding the situation of YIVO and other matters. Of course, America needs to be woken up, and not only North America. South America is even quieter, but it needs to respond. I heard that after coming to Vilna Weinreich planned to travel to America to organize a fundraising campaign. That's good, but he must not go in order to settle down there. We must not give up our last scholarly position in Eastern Europe. We must fight until we have exhausted every possibility. I still think about settling in Vilna, although I understand that there are many quieter places for me in the world (apart from America I have been invited to go to the Land of Israel). I wrote to [Elias] Tcherikower¹⁸ that he, too, should come to Vilna as soon as the political situation becomes clearer. D[aniel] Charney wrote me that he was also dreaming of his old Vilna. We must safeguard YIVO by obtaining official papers as soon as possible and even broaden its charter. We must add to the management a couple of legal experts who know Lithuanian well. We have to utilize the newly arrived scholars for the Aspirantur and not let Rabbi Chayim Oyzer¹⁹ and his mob of rabbis with their yeshivas return Vilna to the 18th century. YIVO must remain a fortress of free critical scholarship.

16 It is unclear who is meant here.

17 The linguist Zelig Kalmanovitch was one of YIVO's main administrators as well as the Yiddish translator of several of Dubnow's works.

18 Elias Tcherikower was the head of the institute's Historical Section.

19 The reference here is to Rabbi Chayim Oyzer Grodzienski, a prominent Orthodox leader and scholar who resided in Vilna.

I hope to come to Vilna for a few days in April, take a look at the situation and then decide where to settle: in Vilna or Kaunas.

You wrote me about last year's financial report of the YIVO press. I would not raise this question at such a difficult time if not for my daughter [Sophia] Erlich and her family in Vilna. I have to support them and send them money from here, but this is very difficult from the administrative side. Therefore I ask you to tell the management that when the statement is ready, they should send it to me and pay my honoraria to my daughter in installments, a certain sum every month: both my honorarium for the *World History* and for the *History of Hasidism* in the editions of the last five or six years. My daughter's address is:

Stefańska 27 apt. 4

Be well, guard YIVO and write me.

Yours, with cordial regards,

S. Dubnow

P.S.: What's the news about Z. Reisen? Has anyone intervened in his case? As for [Henryk] Erlich, nothing has been achieved so far.²⁰

Prof. S. Dubnow

Riga

Riga, 17 July 1940

Mr. Z. Kalmanovitch

YIVO, Vilna

My Dear Friend,

I received your letter from [your] vacation a long time ago, and since I don't know your personal address, I am writing to you via my daughter. In fact, the issue I am writing about concerns her. I would like to ask you, if possible, to pay my daughter the entire remaining balance of the honoraria that YIVO owes me according to the report of 1 January 1940 (1517 litas minus the amount she has received so far). If changes have taken place in YIVO's management, please convey this to the new colleagues, too. I hope they will agree to pay my writer's honoraria which they owe me for quite some time and which has been paid in installments. This is the source of income for my daughter's large family in Vilna.

20 Both the linguist Zalman Reisen, one of YIVO's founders, and the Bundist leader Henryk Erlich, the husband of Sophia Dubnow-Erlich, had been arrested by the Soviets shortly after the outbreak of World War II.

I received volume six of my *World History* in your excellent translation. I hope that this important YIVO publication will be continued under any circumstance. After all, my historical work is cited even in Soviet college history textbooks. I very much want to know what is happening at YIVO. As a member of the honorary presidium of the Curatorium, I can't imagine that the new management would greatly change the work of our institute, which fulfills the requirements of the most modern scholarship. The research work and the Aspirantur must continue in Vilna, our old intellectual center with its youth greatly thirsting for knowledge.

Convey the content of my letter to our colleagues and write me about everything of interest to us, the founders of YIVO.

With best regards,
Yours, S. Dubnow

Riga, 5 March 1941 (fig. 4)

My Dear Friend M. Weinreich,²¹

We got your American address from your sister and I am using it for two purposes: first, to get in touch with you and our displaced friends from whom I have not heard for almost 10 months now; and second, to ask you to locate my wandering family: Sonia²² and her children who left Moscow at the beginning of February and should have arrived in New York, via Vladivostok and Japan, sometime during the first half of March.

Have your wife and son made it to you safely? And how are you yourself, and how are our friends from Paris? I don't even know if they emigrated after the catastrophe. Where is [Elias] Tcherikower and his wife, and where are the others? Where is Dr. Steinberg from London, the younger one?²³ We wonder why they don't write to us here when letters often arrive from America, albeit with a delay. For us, cut off from family and friends in the war-torn lands, it would simply be a joy.

Write me via your sister. She should give [the letter] to her neighbor Roznb[?] who visits me often. I am waiting, waiting.

With cordial regards to you and your family,
Yours, S. Dubnow

21 The scholar Max Weinreich was one of the leaders of YIVO.

22 Sophia Dubnow-Erich and her family are meant here.

23 Aron Steinberg, mentioned above as a translator of Dubnow, was the younger brother of the political activist Isaac Nachman Steinberg.

