Paper brigade

The incredible story of the Vilnius archive

Menachem Kaiser

Perhaps the most significant Jewish archive in Eastern Europe before World War II was that of YIVO, the *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut* (Yiddish Scientific Institute), in Vilnius, then part of Poland. Not due to its size – though it was considerable, with nearly 80,000 items, plus 40,000 books – but to its subject, which was, simply and elusively, the daily lives of Eastern European Jews. YIVO, established in 1925, had a broad mandate – it was a leading educational and cultural institution, with departments for research, pedagogy, philology and history, but its founding premise was that all aspects of Jewish life ought to be rigorously, scientifically studied. Even – or especially – quotidian objects and documents, from synagogue records to lullabies, were considered significant. One of YIVO's most successful and emblematic initiatives was the *zamler* programme, which deputised laypeople in hundreds of cities across Poland and beyond to collect folklore; YIVO was soon deluged with tens of thousands of items. This was in addition to 10,000 newspaper issues; hundreds of youth memoirs; thousands of pages related to pogroms, including eyewitness accounts;

rare manuscripts; correspondence and journals from some of the most notable people of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; photographs; groundbreaking Yiddish bibliographic material; pamphlets; and posters. In aggregate, the archive offered a portrait, simultaneously expansive and granular, of a world about to be wiped out.

The Nazis occupied Vilnius on 24 June 1941; within weeks, the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* (ERR), the agency charged with assessing and appropriating cultural property, ransacked YIVO and other museums, archives and libraries, carting off the most valuable books, incunabula (books published before 1501) and manuscripts. For the next eight months, the modern and spacious YIVO building was used as a barracks for a unit of the Luftwaffe; thousands of documents and books were haphazardly damaged or destroyed. Organised looting resumed in April 1942 under the leadership of Johannes Pohl, a Hebrew-speaking Old Testament scholar and former priest who was the ERR's Hebraica expert and the chief librarian of the Institute for Research on the Jewish Question in Frankfurt. Pohl ordered a select portion of YIVO's collection to be sent to Frankfurt, a task that required knowledgeable, literate workers. A team was recruited from the Vilna Ghetto. The ERR had already requisitioned Herman Kruk, head of the ghetto library; Zelig Kalmanovich, director of YIVO; and Chaikl Lunksi, director of the Strashun library, a beloved public lending library that was being similarly plundered; and they in turn hired a team of twenty, mostly writers and intellectuals, including Abraham Sutzkever, one of the greatest Yiddish poets of the twentieth century, and Shmerke Kaczerginski, a poet and musician who wrote or collected the majority of Holocaust songs known to us today. Within the ghetto this group became known, with a touch of derision,

as the paper brigade – the YIVO building was outside the ghetto and considered a desirable worksite, with fairly lax German oversight and relatively light labour.

But it was heartbreaking work. The members of the paper brigade were only too aware of the value of what they were being forced to give to the Nazis or destroy. A maximum of 30 per cent of the material was to be sent to Frankfurt, with the remainder marked for the mill.

They sought to preserve what they could, though there was a debate over the best course of action. Kalmanovich believed the most valuable items should be sent to Frankfurt, where they would be properly stored and, hopefully, survive the war. But he was in the minority, and the others launched an extensive and sustained smuggling operation. Books and documents were transported out of YIVO

Many in the ghetto thought it lunacy to take such a risk for something inedible

and into the ghetto, and placed in crates in specially constructed *malinas*, or hiding spots, often in cooperation with the Fareynikte Partizaner Organizatsye (FPO), the ghetto's underground partisan organisation. The largest *malina*, at 6 Shavel Street, descended more than 18 metres underground, had its own ventilation system and siphoned electricity from outside the ghetto.

Thousands of books and hundreds of thousands of documents, from YIVO and many other institutions, were hidden in the ghetto. Kruk, who had a permit that allowed him to enter and exit the ghetto without being searched, was a particularly enthusiastic and capable smuggler. Others would stuff papers inside their clothing, or use a wagon with a false bottom, or employ any number

of creative tactics. Sutzkever once obtained authorisation to bring "wastepaper" – in fact letters by Tolstoy, Gorky, Bialik and Sholem Aleichem – into the ghetto to be used as fuel. Occasionally they were caught with the literary contraband and severely beaten. (Smuggling paper wasn't as serious an offence as smuggling food, but even so, many in the ghetto thought it lunacy to take such a risk for something inedible.) Later they created hiding spots in the attic and basement of the YIVO building, secreting as many as 5000 books onsite. Material was also given to sympathetic Lithuanians, most notably Ona Šimaitė, a librarian at Vilnius University.

The sorting – and the smuggling – ceased in August 1943, a few weeks before the ghetto was liquidated. Members of the paper brigade who were part of the FPO, including Kaczerginski and Sutzkever, escaped to the forest. Most of the others were killed.

The Soviets liberated Vilnius in July 1944; within days, Kaczerginski, Sutzkever and other partisans began to retrieve the hidden material. The YIVO building was a pile of rubble, and most of the *malinas* had been destroyed or were unreachable. But at least three were intact and accessible, including the bunker at 6 Shavel Street – which contained nearly thirty crates. Initially they stored the material in Kaczerginski's apartment, and then – somehow securing approval from the communist authorities – they succeeded in establishing a Jewish museum, housed in the former ghetto library. By 1945, the museum held 25,000 books and tens of thousands of documents.

The material that had been sent to Frankfurt, from YIVO as well as from hundreds of other Jewish institutions across Europe, was discovered soon after the war in cellars of bombed-out buildings, in caves, castles, schools, barns and offices. It amounted to the largest Judaica collection in history. American forces stored and

processed the material in a depot in Offenbach, outside Frankfurt. More than 75,000 items were identified as YIVO's.

YIVO had survived as an institution, even as its building in Vilnius had been destroyed. Max Weinreich, a founder and director, had been en route to Denmark for a linguistics conference when the war broke out; he never returned to Vilnius, and in 1940 moved to New York, where he re-established YIVO's American branch as the new headquarters.

Weinreich was desperate to secure YIVO's material and have it sent to New York, but the process was enormously fraught and complex. Standard restitution practice was to send material to its country of origin, and anything defined as heirless Jewish property was given to Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (JCR), a consortium of trustee organisations that distributed it to Jewish communities around the world. The YIVO material was being claimed by the Soviets – with support from the Jewish Museum in Vilnius – as well as by JCR, and the US War Department and State Department issued conflicting orders. Weinreich, however, proved adept at navigating bureaucracies and currying favour with American officials, particularly those who had ties to Vilnius and/or YIVO. He successfully lobbied to have YIVO New York recognised as a valid American institution and a successor organisation to YIVO Vilna. And worsening US–Soviet relations meant that the United States did not formally recognise the Soviets' annexation of the Baltic states, and would not restitute material there. Finally, on 21 June 1947, the Americans – acting unliterally, without approval from their Allied partners – shipped 420 crates containing 79,204 items. The crates were initially housed in a Manischewitz company warehouse in New Jersey before being sent on to YIVO. Over the next five years, nearly 12,000 additional items were sent from Offenbach to YIVO.

It's a triumphant story of reclamation, but also more than that – because not everything that was sent to YIVO had belonged to YIVO before the war. Nearly three-quarters of the more than 34,000 books were originally from the Strashun library, and at least some of the archival material had belonged to other, no longer extant, institutions; the crates had been marked "YIVO & Associated Libraries". Over the years, YIVO has offered shifting explanations as to how the Strashun library books became the property of YIVO – Strashun trustees had asked YIVO to ship their books to safety; the Nazis had merged the two libraries; the Strashun books had been physically taken to the YIVO building – but none are supported by documentary evidence. The consensus among historians is that Weinreich, along with other representatives and allies of YIVO, may have stretched the truth in order to have non-YIVO material from Vilnius, most notably from the Strashun library, recognised as YIVO's and sent to New York.

This is not a condemnation of YIVO – not of its means nor its ends; there is a fine line, sometimes, between theft and salvation. What YIVO did was a response to the chaos, the obliteration, unleashed by the Nazis; it was a desperate, if indiscriminate, gathering of what had survived and what was now, again, in danger – the Soviets successfully claimed more than 1000 crates from Offenbach, much of which disappeared into the Soviet void. Almost by default, YIVO, as the only Jewish institution from Vilnius to have survived the war, became the bearer of the memory of Vilnius Jewry.

It was a role that was reinforced when YIVO began receiving items that had been smuggled out of the Jewish Museum in Vilnius – first by Sutzkever, and later, once the Soviets' antagonism towards Jewish memory and culture became overwhelmingly clear, by Kaczerginski. The two of them smuggled thousands of

documents – including an eighteenth-century record book of the Vilna Gaon's synagogue and diaries written in the ghetto – through Poland and then Paris and finally to YIVO, where they became the Sutzkever-Kaczerginski collection, one of YIVO's core holdings.

Soviet authorities shut down the Jewish Museum in 1949, divvying up its material between several state-run institutions. In subsequent years, anti-Jewish sentiment in the Soviet Union intensified, and Hebrew and Yiddish books were destroyed en masse by institutions and individuals. From the other side of the Iron Curtain, it seemed all but certain that the books and documents that remained in Vilnius, despite surviving the Nazis, were now gone.

*

In April 1988, Sam Norich, then the executive director of YIVO, travelled to Poland for a photo exhibition. A couple of days before his flight home, he received a cryptic message from one of YIVO's researchers, Lucjan Dobroszycki, that a meeting had been arranged in Warsaw at the home of a local historian. Norich wasn't informed of the meeting's purpose, nor who would be there, but it was made clear that Norich would be interested to hear whatever it was that whoever this was had to say.

So Norich went to the home of the historian, and met the man who had orchestrated the meeting: a thirty-year-old Jewish Lithuanian named Emanuelis Zingeris. Zingeris was a university lecturer who had written his dissertation on Jewish cultural heritage in Lithuania. He was also a rising star in Sajūdis, the political organisation leading the struggle for Lithuanian independence – hence the secrecy: Zingeris was almost certainly being tracked by Soviet authorities. Zingeris had gone to all this trouble in order to tell Norich that, in the course of his graduate research, he had

spent time in the Book Chamber, a state-run book storage facility housed in a former monastery, and had come across books and documents that were clearly YIVO's. But he offered few details, wouldn't specify which books or documents, how many there were, or what condition they were in. He said only that when the time was right, he'd be in touch. There was nothing Norich could do but go back to New York and wait.

"Zingeris," Norich told me, "was baiting the hook."

A few months later, Zingeris got in touch, and invited Norich to come to Vilnius, officially in order to attend the founding meeting of the Jewish Culture Society. Norich readily accepted, and he and Marek Web, YIVO's chief archivist, made the trip in January 1989. The day after the meeting – at which, Norich says, Zingeris's political ambitions and talents were on full display – Zingeris brought Norich and Web to the Book Chamber. They took in the faded magnificence of the former monastery, the books stacked nearly to the ceiling. They met the director, who, after some small talk, had an employee wheel out a dolly on which were stacked five packages wrapped in brown paper and secured with twine.

The director selected a package and unwrapped it, revealing a stack of documents, which he passed, one at a time, to Norich and Web. Web – a Polish native, fluent in half a dozen languages and intimately familiar with YIVO's archive – immediately recognised many of these documents. He knew which collection they belonged to, the gaps they filled in. There were even letters, Norich told me, that responded to ones held in the New York archive. Each of the packages was similarly filled with documents, thousands in total, and this was, Zingeris intimated, only the tip of the iceberg. Afterwards, the packages were rewrapped and retied, stacked on the dolly and wheeled away.

*

Much of the material thought for forty years to have been lost or destroyed had in fact survived. When the Jewish Museum was dissolved in 1949, its holdings were inherited by the Book Chamber in Soviet-occupied Lithuania, and its director, Antanas Ulpis, a true bibliophile, safeguarded the books and documents, at considerable risk. Ulpis even persuaded Vilnius University to give him 10,000 Hebrew and Yiddish books it had planned to pulp, and secured from the Historical Revolutionary Museum and Institute for the History of the Communist Party their Jewish documents, which included parts of the Jewish Museum's archive. Many of the books he hid in plain sight, among the million-plus volumes stored in the monastery; he even clandestinely catalogued nearly 20,000 books with the help of Jewish bibliographers and volunteer pensioners. Ulpis wasn't authorised to store archives, let alone Jewish archives, but did

"It was clear that the archive had survived only because it had been hidden"

so anyway, burying them behind or underneath piles of books, in the basement – even inside an organ. He stored portions of the documents in different institutions, including the Library of the Academy of Sciences and the manuscript department of Lithuania's National Library.

Ulpis died in 1981 and left no account of his heroic act; his son, Dainius, told me that Ulpis never even told his wife what he had done. What we know we know from his staff, most of whom Ulpis never confided in, but who nonetheless picked up hints, or saw something unusual, or, later, discovered the material. In an interview, one employee, recorded as E.R., recounts moving a large pile of Soviet newspapers and finding 173 boxes of "Jewish material".

"Their physical state was terrible," E.R. said. "Crumpled, dirty pages; many of them torn, mouldy and wet. It was clear that the archive had survived only because it had been hidden."

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Upon exiting the Book Chamber, Norich, beside himself, grabbed Zingeris's arm and told him that these documents belong to YIVO, and must be returned to YIVO. "I could see the smile fade from his face," Norich told me. "He turned away and said, 'We'll talk. It's not so easy.' I knew at that instant that Zingeris was going to be our chief proponent until he became our chief opponent."

Over the next few months, Norich attempted to persuade various Lithuanian officials to return the documents, or at least open a negotiation. But it was a turbulent time in Lithuania: the country was fitfully emerging from under Soviet rule, everything was in flux. One of the top Sajūdis officials agreed to return the material, Norich said, but was later deposed. Norich met twice with Vytautas Landsbergis, the chairman of Lithuania's Supreme Council (the highest-ranking official in those years), and once, in a motel in New Jersey, with future president Algirdas Brazauskas. But nothing came of it.

Zingeris, elected to parliament in 1990, was deeply involved; he was, according to Norich, "the only one [among Lithuanian politicians] to deal with Jewish matters; that was his brief". (Zingeris, who remains a member of parliament, initially agreed to be interviewed for this story but did not respond to numerous follow-up calls and messages.) Zingeris had helped found a Jewish museum in 1989 – later to be known as the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum – and he made it clear that he considered the material to be Lithuanian cultural heritage, and thus Lithuania's property. But he left open the possibility that something could be worked out.

The material was, clearly, a source of leverage. For Lithuania, newly independent, fighting for international recognition and standing, the material, Norich said, "meant an opening to America, meant money, meant the ability to influence Washington". At one point, a politician floated the idea of YIVO returning to Vilnius, or at least opening a branch there – Lithuanian officials had, of their own accord, already contacted a Finnish firm to design a new building, to be paid for by YIVO.

Norich eventually secured an agreement with the directors of the Lithuanian Central State Archives, which now housed most of the material. YIVO would provide microfilm equipment and archival training, and in exchange Lithuania would *lend* the material to YIVO, so it could be copied, catalogued and returned.

The Lithuanians reneged. Norich subsequently learned that the directors were excoriated by politicians for agreeing to a deal when it was clear that more could be squeezed out of the Americans. The deal was renegotiated – YIVO sweetened their offer, added more equipment. The Lithuanians signed, then reneged again.

In 1992, Norich was fired, Sajūdis lost the election, any ongoing negotiations were scrambled. A few years later, though, the new research director of YIVO, Allan Nadler, was able to secure a deal. Three crates were to be sent to YIVO to be catalogued and photocopied, then returned. But when the first two arrived, it seems YIVO's leadership seriously contemplated violating the agreement and keeping the documents. (A contemporaneous scholarly account concludes, triumphantly, that the "materials were shipped to YIVO … at long last reunited with their spiritual home and with the Jewish people".) It was a brewing scandal, with accusations and counter-accusations, but eventually YIVO relented and sent the two crates back. The third crate was never sent.

Over the next few years, the issue receded and the material stayed put, mostly unused, unseen, much of it improperly stored or misplaced. Fira Bramson, a devoted and talented Jewish Lithuanian librarian, did some preliminary cataloguing, but there were otherwise few people in the country interested in this material, or even able to read it. Every few years, maybe, a foreign scholar would come to Vilnius and pull up some documents. Jack Jacobs, a Fulbright scholar in Vilnius in 2009, described to me the experience of reading some of the pre-war Yiddish newspapers, how delicately he'd handle the pages and how, even then, they would disintegrate in his fingers.

By the time Jonathan Brent, the current director of YIVO, came on board in 2009, it was more or less a dead issue. Once a year, he told me, the Lithuanian foreign minister would visit and make the case that YIVO should relocate to Vilnius, but there was otherwise no substantive communication between YIVO and Lithuanian authorities.

*

YIVO's claim on the material in Lithuania, on the books and documents saved by Antanas Ulpis, is in fact tiered. There's the material that unquestionably belonged to YIVO before the war – books with a YIVO ex libris, for example, or documents clearly part of its archive. To this portion, a commonsense argument applies: what belonged to YIVO then should belong to YIVO now (given that YIVO New York is the successor organisation to YIVO Vilna). But a significant fraction of the material did not belong to YIVO before the war, or at best has uncertain provenance. (YIVO claims that nearly all of this non-YIVO material, which originated from a wide variety of Vilnius institutions, was given to it before the war, but in many cases there is no documentation to support this.) Then there's the material

that was written during or after the war. In these instances YIVO, of course, has no obvious legal claim, but still there is, symbolically, narratively, an entanglement. Most (though not all) of the corresponding parts of these collections, or at least what's extant, is held in YIVO's New York archives – this is the material that was retrieved from Offenbach or smuggled out of the Jewish Museum.

Rightly or wrongly, YIVO became and remains the go-to repository for the documentary remains of Vilnius Jewry; it was certainly recognised as such by Sutzkever, Kaczerginski, and others who risked so much for these documents. It's a moral reality that influences the historical account: the documents in Lithuania are almost always referred to as "YIVO material" without qualification, including in many scholarly accounts. (Even Lithuanian officials, when agreeing to send the material to New York in the 1990s, seem to have been under the impression that

That YIVO survived is inspiring; that it's the the only institution to have survived is heartrending

all or at least most of it was YIVO's.) It's admirable, this marker of survival, but also poignant, as it puts into relief all that was lost. It flattens the sprawling, vibrant story of the origins of these documents, which is the sprawling, vibrant story of a city, a culture, a people. That YIVO survived is inspiring; that it's the only institution to have survived is heartrending.

Lithuania's counterclaim is, simply, that all of the material – even what had indisputably been YIVO's – is part of Lithuanian heritage, and therefore belongs to and in Lithuania. (Zingeris and other officials have sometimes argued – though who knows how seriously – that the material in New York is rightfully theirs too.)

A parallel argument is that the contemporary Jewish community in Lithuania is the spiritual heir to the pre-war Jewish community, and that this material is part of its legacy.

This position might have some legal merit – none of this has ever been adjudicated, in Lithuania or in the United States, and restitution laws are notoriously thorny and internationally inconsistent – but is somewhat undermined by the fact that, for decades, these documents were not properly cared for, were not properly stored, preserved or processed. They were not treated, in other words, as Lithuanian heritage. This wasn't due to any overt antisemitic policy; it was simply overlooked for so long, negligence that can at least in part be explained by a lack of resources and, especially, a lack of qualified librarians and researchers. The Jewish community of Lithuania is tiny, maybe 5000 or 6000 people, and there just isn't much happening in terms of Jewish culture or scholarship. Community isn't defined solely by location: there were Jews in Vilnius before the war and Jews in Vilnius after the war, but that doesn't mean there's continuity. There are even questions of basic geography at play – before World War II, Vilnius, of course, was part of Poland. And in fact, after YIVO took possession of the crates from Offenbach, the Central Committee of Polish Jews initiated action to force their return – not to Vilnius, by then part of Lithuania, but to Poland. When the Allies distributed what had been designated as "heirless Jewish property", one of the chief considerations was utility – where would the books be read, the documents studied, the artefacts used. And YIVO was an explicitly transnational institution, as Yiddish is a transnational language. That it had been headquartered in Vilnius had less to do with the city per se than the people, the culture, the vibrancy that existed there – and are no longer there.

The foundational principles of modern archival science – which emphasise the preservation of an archive's context and order – are hardly clarifying in this instance. The material was heaped indiscriminately in Frankfurt; heaped again in the ghetto; then again in the Jewish Museum; then again in the Book Chamber. The old archives were in a sense destroyed – that is to say, the archives themselves, as an organisational unit, rather than their contents – and new ones were constituted.

Practically speaking, it's all moot anyway. It doesn't matter how legally or morally persuasive YIVO's claim is, because Lithuania is a sovereign state, and can more or less do what it wants. In certain cases, with certain countries, diplomatic pressure can be effective: Israel, for example, successfully lobbied the city of Worms to surrender the Worms Mahzor, a priceless illuminated codex from the thirteenth century. YIVO, however, has little political clout. And a lawsuit would be lengthy, expensive and unlikely to amount to anything beyond, at best, a moral victory. First a US court would have to agree that it has jurisdiction, and even if YIVO won the ensuing trial – hardly guaranteed – there are no real means to force compliance. (The State Department is generally very reluctant to jeopardise diplomatic relations on behalf of private individuals and institutions.) In 2004, Chabad successfully sued Russia in the US Federal Court for the return of its archive, but Russia simply refused to recognise the court's authority, prompting a judge in 2013 to issue contempt sanctions of $50,000 a day; Russia ignored this, too.

I asked Michael Kurtz, author of *America and the Return of Nazi Contraband*, what he thought YIVO's chances were of ever retrieving the material. "Zero," he said. "In this case, possession is ten-tenths of the law."

*

Only in 2012 was there a rapprochement. Brent, YIVO's current executive director, had gone to Vilnius, seen the sorry state the documents were in and understood what was in danger of being irretrievably lost. Moved, he met with Zingeris, who was still a member of parliament and the most politically powerful Jew in the country. Zingeris's stance hadn't changed – this was Lithuanian heritage, it belonged in Lithuania, YIVO should relocate, and so on. But Brent didn't demand Lithuania give up the material. Instead, he proposed they set aside the question of ownership – "We were fighting over the documents like the two prostitutes fighting in the story of Solomon," he told me – and work together to preserve, scan and share the material digitally. (In his previous job at Yale University Press, Brent had helped spearhead the digitisation of Stalin's personal archive.) Zingeris, enthusiastic, made the requisite connections.

An agreement was hammered out between YIVO and the Central State Archives; later, parallel agreements were made with the National Library of Lithuania and the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences. It was, in a sense, an updated and expanded digital version of the agreement made in the 1990s: the archives and documents – more than 400,000 in Vilnius and more than a million in New York, plus more than 12,000 books – would be digitised and uploaded to a central site. The project would take an estimated seven years to complete and cost more than US$5 million. Nearly all of it would be funded by YIVO.

The agreement, when it was announced, had its share of critics. Some felt that it was unconscionable to work, in any capacity, with the Lithuanian government, which has a spotty record when it comes to issues of Jewish history, particularly regarding Lithuanian complicity in the Holocaust. It was, in part, an issue of optics: YIVO would now be giving Lithuania an imprimatur of responsible

behaviour with respect to Jews and Jewish history – a PR coup – while asking basically nothing in return. In effect, all Lithuania had to do was allow YIVO to pay for the digitisation of documents that were (at least in part) YIVO's. It was as if, critics said, Lithuania had been holding these documents hostage, and now the ransom was being paid. "It was a complete appeasement," said a former YIVO board member who asked not to be identified.

Nonetheless, the project launched in 2015. Dedicated teams in Vilnius and New York worked independently – though YIVO librarians travelled frequently to Vilnius – to preserve, process and digitise the material. The Lithuanians sent the images to New York (on hard drives, in the early stages, hand-carried by YIVO staff) – where they were quality-checked and uploaded, then given descriptions and key-words, providing the connective tissue between the collections. In 2016, Lithuania's National

"This is the most significant event in Jewish scholarship since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls"

Library completed a renovation, and while moving books from the Book Chamber to the library, more documents turned up. These became part of the National Library's Judaica collection, under the auspices of the newly formed Judaica Research Centre, headed by Lara Lempert. Jonathan Brent and Suzanne Leon, then YIVO's director of development, raised nearly the entire budget for the digi-tisation effort, anchored by a multi-million-dollar gift from Edward Blank, a telemarketing pioneer. In 2017, another trove of documents was discovered in the manuscript collection at the National Library, and the project was extended so these could be digitised too.

*

By the time the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections project is completed, in early 2022, more than one and a half million pages, from four institutions in two countries, will have been preserved and uploaded. "This material is stunningly important, and there is a great deal of it," Jack Jacobs, the professor and former Fulbright scholar, said. "It will radically impact any number of disciplines, from history to literature to folklore." A growing list of remarkable documents has been excavated – a notebook containing drafts of poems Sutzkever wrote in the ghetto, for example, and the diary of Beba Epstein, a fifth-grader living in Vilnius in the 1930s – and collectively the material will reshape our understanding of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the war. Glenn Dynner, a historian and professor at New York's Sarah Lawrence College, described to me how recently unearthed documents upend prevailing narratives of pogroms, for instance – eyewitness accounts from the Ukrainian pogroms of 1919 attest to female pogrom leaders and Jewish self-defence initiatives. There are documents that have never been seen, and there are documents that only now, in context, make sense: more than one researcher I spoke to used the metaphor of puzzle pieces being put together. Lara Lempert told me that there are documents whose pages were scattered in four different locations, and have now been assembled online.

"Simply put," said David Fishman, author of *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis*, "this is the most significant event in Jewish scholarship since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls."

The question of ownership remains undecided, though by design, suspended Talmudically in a state of non-resolution. (A celebrated online exhibition of Beba Epstein's memoir credits the

Lithuanian National Library as the "custodian" of the document.) But the agreement, even if not technically a concession on YIVO's part, functionally ratifies Lithuania's claim: they have gotten away without recognising this material as YIVO's, let alone returning it. (YIVO would not allow me to read the agreement, claiming that it is part of their institutional archives and thus not available to the public for fifty years. When I asked Lithuanian librarians about the dispute, they said they were unaware that YIVO had even made a claim on the material. Brent, when I told him this, expressed satisfaction, saying that it demonstrated just how effectively the question of ownership had been "bracketed".) "As a scholar I'm overjoyed," Fishman said, "but as a Jew, I'm heartbroken." And some of that early criticism has arguably been borne out: Lithuania has touted the project to a degree that feels borderline propagandistic – pushing out a steady stream of PR releases, awarding Brent the Cross of the Knight of the Order for Merits to Lithuania – but most of the scholars I spoke to agreed that, overall, Lithuania's commitment to the project, even if self-serving, constitutes progress.

The story of these objects is a material story: these books, these documents, were smuggled, hidden, buried, unburied, salavaged

It's not a resolution, then, but is, pragmatically, the best-case scenario for these miraculously surviving remnants of Eastern European Jewry. Lithuania was never going to give up the material, but now the originals are preserved, with high-resolution scans available online. "If I can obtain access, read, make use of – that suffices," said Jacobs, who sits on the board of the Claims

Conference – an organisation that negotiates with governments on behalf of Holocaust survivors – and is only too familiar with the hopelessness of most restitution claims. "I'm not a fetishist."

There are downsides to digitisation – any iteration introduces errors, and important paratextual information, like a handwritten note on the back of the document, may not be captured – but most researchers consider these trade-offs acceptable. Though there is also something discomfiting about holding up digital scans as satisfactory, or even superior, substitutes for the original. Maybe, in terms of scholarship, all that matters is being able to read the document – who cares if it's on a screen? But scholarship is hardly the only metric. The story of these objects is a material story: these books, these documents, were smuggled, hidden, buried, unburied, salvaged. Their story is imprinted onto them, and it's a story that can be experienced, or felt, or intuited, only in nonvirtual proximity. They are not unlike art, in that sense, or any objects with extratextual historical or sentimental value.

Cecile Kuznitz, professor of history at New York's Bard College and author of *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, told me a revealing anecdote about going through YIVO microfilm and seeing scans of multiple copies of the same booklet. The duplicates had been included because, she learned, one of the copies contained a handwritten note from Sutzkever saying that it had been hidden in the Vilna ghetto. Nothing changed in terms of that booklet's content, but it has a legacy that isn't scannable. "Every surviving book from that world," wrote American historian Lucy Dawidowicz about what she saw in the depot in Offenbach, "had become a historical document, a cultural artifact, specimen, and testament of a murdered civilization."

While reporting this story, I visited the National Library in Vilnius, and Lempert showed me Beba Epstein's memoir. And

in New York, the YIVO archivist brought out a handwritten diary of Theodore Herzl; the record book from the Vilna Gaon's synagogue; fragments from the earliest manuscript of *The Dybbuk*; and pages of Herman Kruk's diary, written in the Vilna ghetto. The power of these documents was immense – especially, for me, Kruk's diary. I had spent years researching the Vilna Ghetto, and had gone through the published version of the diary countless times. I was intimately familiar with the content, from his careful, loving descriptions of the ghetto library to his interactions with Jacob Gens, the ghetto chief. But I was wholly unprepared for the sensation of seeing it, touching it.

And then the archivist put it back in the stacks, where it will remain, because it is fragile, and because it is now on the internet. ≣