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# **Yiddishism and Creation of the Yiddish Nation**

Proceedings of the International Workshop  
Tokyo, January 7 and Kyoto, January 9, 2017

Edited by Yuu Nishimura and Mari Nomura

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**Knowledge for the People:**  
**YIVO and the Development of Yiddish Scholarship<sup>1</sup>**

Cecile E. Kuznitz

Imagine the following scene: it is Saint Petersburg in the spring of 1917, shortly after the Russian Revolution. Jewish students and intellectuals gathered in the apartment that some of them share to celebrate the overthrow of the tsar and discuss their dream of building Jewish culture in a new democratic Russia. At this time there lived in Saint Petersburg many of the figures who would be among the founders of the *Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut* [Yiddish Scientific Institute], known by its acronym YIVO. These included Elias Tcherikower, the future head of YIVO's Historical Section; the linguist Zelig Kalmanovitch, later an administrator at YIVO and the editor of many of its publications; and the scholar Max Weinreich, who would become the institute's most important leader and intellectual figure.

At this evening in 1917 the linguist and literary scholar Nokhem Shtif suddenly interrupted the festivities. As another guest later recalled:

At such a party and in such an atmosphere Nokhem Shtif got up and gave a deeply serious speech. . . . [He said that] there must be established a Yiddish scholarly academy of the first rank for Yiddish, for Yiddish literature, and for Yiddish folklore as well as for all branches of scholarship that have a direct relationship to Jewish life. Certainly such a thing will not happen the day after tomorrow, but we must now set such an academy as a goal.<sup>2</sup>

In 1925 Shtif realized his dream with the creation of YIVO, the first center for scholarship in Yiddish (the traditional vernacular language of European Jews) and about the history and culture of Yiddish-speaking Jewry. Yet why in 1917, at

a time of such great upheaval in Russia, did Shtif and his colleagues see the creation of a “Yiddish scholarly academy” as such a priority?

To begin to answer this question we should keep in mind the developments of the mid and late nineteenth century, when many minority groups in the large multi-ethnic empires of Central and Eastern Europe – specifically the Habsburg and tsarist empires – developed nationalist aspirations. As part of these movements, national activists in the region set about researching their own vernacular languages and traditions. According to the theories of the time, which were rooted in the ideas of the German thinker Johann Gottfried von Herder, a group’s possessing its own distinct language and culture was a marker of its status as a nation. In this way, documenting vernacular cultures had political implications, since it could bolster a group’s claim to minority rights and even to statehood.

When European Jews adopted these ideas they created not one but two nationalist movements. On the one hand, Zionism argued for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine and the revival of Hebrew, the “holy tongue” of study and prayer that had not been a spoken language for 2000 years. On the other, Diaspora nationalists affirmed Jews’ status as a minority group dispersed throughout Europe and indeed the world. They advocated measures to secure Jews’ rights in the lands of their residence and to develop a national culture in the Yiddish language.<sup>3</sup> Without the goal of a homeland as a focus, language replaced territory as the defining factor of the so-called “Yiddish nation.” While Yiddish was often denigrated as a mere “jargon” associated with women and the uneducated, Diaspora nationalists valued it as a reflection of the spirit of the “folk,” the Jewish masses.

Thus one of YIVO’s primary goals was to raise the prestige of Yiddish by documenting its long history and contemporary vitality. It also served as a body with the authority to set rules for Yiddish spelling, grammar, and usage,



analogous to the Academie Française for the French language. By researching Yiddish and creating a standardized tongue, YIVO sought to elevate it from a lowly vernacular to a vehicle of high culture. In this way, Diaspora nationalists believed that YIVO would not only win respect and rights for the Yiddish language, but also for all of its 11 million speakers.

Such claims took on new weight in the wake of World War I, as multi-ethnic empires were replaced by new nation states with significant ethnic minority populations. At the Paris Peace Conference these states were compelled to sign a series of Minorities Treaties that mandated government support for the cultural and educational work of each country's national minorities, including Jews. Diaspora nationalists hoped that these treaties would create a framework for developing a national culture in Yiddish with a secure base of government funding. Although the treaties were rarely enforced in practice, they led Jewish activists to begin the interwar period in a mood of optimism.

Thus in the 1920s these activists set about building a network of modern, secular institutions functioning in the Yiddish language. These included newspapers, publishing houses, literary clubs, and theaters as well as schools from the level of kindergartens to teachers seminaries. Shtif saw YIVO as the equivalent of a Yiddish university, complementing lower-level schools by filling in the "higher rungs on the pedagogical ladder."<sup>4</sup> Thus in the interwar period YIVO became not just an academy for scholars but the apex of an entire cultural network, what supporters called "the crown of the building of secular Yiddish culture."<sup>5</sup>

While the rise of nationalism provided one impetus for documenting vernacular cultures, another was the sense that much heritage was in imminent danger of being lost. By the nineteenth century many European groups feared that their traditional ways of life were threatened by the forces of modernization,

urbanization, and secularization. In 1891, the historian and theoretician of Diaspora nationalism Simon Dubnow published a famous essay lamenting that East European Jews were woefully ignorant of their own history. Important books and documents were uncatalogued and uncared for, so that scholars could not identify the sources they needed for their work and knowledge of the Jewish past was endangered. Dubnow issued a call to collect and preserve such valuable material, a portion of which eventually made its way to YIVO.<sup>6</sup>

Such concerns intensified with the widespread destruction and displacement of World War I, which had a disproportionate impact on the dense Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. As we have seen, in the wake of the overthrow of the tsarist regime in February 1917 Nokhem Shtif and his colleagues envisaged an institute for Yiddish scholarship in a newly democratic Russian state. Yet these plans were soon dashed by the Bolshevik Revolution, which led many Jewish activists to flee in the wake of war, famine, and political repression. Most went to Ukraine, which for a short time offered the promise of Jewish autonomy but was soon engulfed in a wave of violent pogroms. Many then settled in Berlin, which proved another temporary refuge. Their wanderings strengthened their conviction of the need for a secure haven in which to pursue their work and build Yiddish culture.

It was in Berlin in fall 1924 that Shtif once again tried to realize his dream, composing a detailed memorandum entitled “On a Yiddish Academic Institute.”<sup>7</sup> In it he laid out a plan for four research sections plus a library and archives, which closely matched the structure that YIVO would adopt. The largest section, Philology, included the study of Yiddish language, literature, and folklore. The Historical Section emphasized the Jewish past in Eastern Europe, while sections for Economic-Statistics and Psychology-Pedagogy studied problems of contemporary Jewish life. Shtif envisioned an organization with its headquarters in Berlin, his current place of residence, and branches in Yiddish-speaking

communities throughout the world.

In his memorandum Shtif vividly described the plight of would-be Yiddish scholars like himself: they worked in isolation without any institutional backing or secure income and often faced great difficulties in obtaining access to needed material. YIVO addressed these concerns by fulfilling Dubnow's call for a central repository where scholars, students, and the interested public could find the sources they needed to study Jewish life and society. Shtif and his colleagues also imagined YIVO as a place where they could gather, meet like-minded scholars, and obtain support for their work. Thus the institute served as a central address for both the people and the materials necessary for creating Yiddish culture.

Moreover, YIVO served as a center for Yiddish in a symbolic sense as well. Even as they followed in the footsteps of other European nationalist movements, Diaspora nationalists faced a unique challenge: they represented a nation that had no territory of its own and was scattered across the countries of Eastern Europe, with emigrant outposts from North America to South Africa. To its supporters YIVO functioned as a focal point for Jewish identity in this expansive Diaspora.

For the stateless "Yiddish nation," defined by language rather than land, YIVO was the closest that Yiddish speakers came to a national institution. It was the equivalent of a national library, university, and language academy. Moreover, it was even described as holding political significance: one supporter wrote that it served "the dispersed Jewish people . . . instead of a government."<sup>8</sup> As the linguist Noah Prylucki put it, "Yiddish itself is recognized as a territory, the anarchic republic with its seat in Vilna. YIVO is the scholarly academy of the territory 'Yiddish.'"<sup>9</sup>

As Prylucki noted, if the "anarchic republic" sometimes referred to as "Yiddishland" had a capital, it was Vilna. In the interwar period this city was Wilno, Poland (today it is Vilnius, Lithuania) but to Jews it was known as "the Jerusalem of Lithuania." Long renowned for its Jewish scholarship and

publishing, in the nineteenth century it also became a center of *haskalah* [the Jewish Enlightenment movement]. Vilna was located in the region that Yiddish-speaking Jews referred to as *Lite* [Lithuania], which included all of the Baltics as well as parts of present-day Belarus and Eastern Poland. Since this area had historically been multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, there was less pressure on Jews to assimilate into one or another dominant non-Jewish culture. As a result, it became fertile ground for modern Jewish cultural and political movements.

While in other locales upwardly mobile Jews tended to abandon Yiddish in favor of European languages such as German or Russian, in Vilna all streams of Jewish society continued to use the language in large numbers. In addition, while both Zionism and Diaspora nationalism flourished in the city, tensions between the two camps were less pronounced than elsewhere and both tended to conduct business in Yiddish. Thus the language became a matter of Jewish pride rather than a point of division. By the interwar period Vilna was the site of arguably the greatest flowering of secular Yiddish culture, home to a network of renowned institutions that included schools, theaters, and literary movements.

YIVO's earliest supporters agreed with Shtif's proposal that their headquarters should be in "a great European center" such as Berlin or possibly Vienna.<sup>10</sup> Yet Shtif was disappointed by the initial lukewarm responses he received from leading Diaspora nationalists in the West, including Dubnow in Berlin and Chaim Zhitlowsky in New York. In stark contrast Shtif's memorandum was enthusiastically championed by a group of Vilna activists, many of whom had ties to the Yiddish secular school movement. At its head were two figures who would become the institute's leaders throughout the interwar period: Max Weinreich and the linguist and journalist Zalman Reisen. In fact, it quickly became clear that YIVO's strongest base of support was in Vilna and the surrounding region of Lite. By spring 1926 its Berlin office was virtually inactive, while the Vilna branch had already prepared the institute's first scholarly

publication and gathered thousands of items for its collections.

Although it took two years for YIVO's leaders to settle on Vilna as their center, in retrospect all agreed that "the Jerusalem of Lithuania" was a fitting home for the first institute devoted to Yiddish scholarship. In 1928 YIVO purchased a building in a newly developed neighborhood of Vilna a short distance from the dilapidated Jewish quarter. Once the renovated headquarters finally opened in January 1933, its verdant setting and modern furnishings presented an image of Yiddish culture as forward-looking and innovative. The building soon became both a local landmark and an international tourist attraction. As the YIVO newsletter *Yedies* [News] wrote, "People come from all countries and parts of the world, and as they arrive in Vilna they go first of all to YIVO."<sup>11</sup> If Vilna was the closest that the "Yiddish nation" came to a capital city, then the YIVO headquarters was the nearest it had to a capitol building.

The phrase invoked repeatedly to describe YIVO's overarching mission was its desire "to serve the 'folk,'" the Yiddish-speaking masses, by producing research with relevance to its own experiences. But just how would an organization devoted to such arcane matters as Yiddish grammar be germane to ordinary Jewish men and women? One way was by studying the life of the folk itself. Here too YIVO was inspired by the work of Simon Dubnow. As a historian Dubnow pioneered the "sociological" approach to Jewish history that stressed the experiences of common people. In contrast to earlier Jewish scholarship that focused on great rabbis and intellectual trends, Dubnow explored daily life and broad-based social movements. YIVO carried on Dubnow's legacy with its commitment to documenting and researching the lives of the Jewish masses. For example, the Historical Section examined phenomena such as the Jewish labor movement that involved a large number of workers.

Folklore was considered the quintessential product of folk culture, and

YIVO's Ethnographic Commission (a subdivision of the Philological Section) was one of its most active and successful divisions. While the institute's scholars viewed folklore as a remnant of a traditional way of life on the wane in the modern era, they were also committed to investigating contemporary Jewish society. The Economic-Statistical Section researched current economic and demographic trends among a broad segment of the Jewish public, while the Psychological-Pedagogical Section collected data on Jewish education and worked closely with the Yiddish secular schools in Vilna.

As Dubnow had realized in 1891, in order to study the folk scholars first needed to gather the necessary documents and data. Thus building a library and archives was the crucial first step in YIVO's work. But how could a small institution with a limited and uncertain budget create what are still today the world's largest collections on East European Jewry? It turned to the folk itself, enlisting ordinary individuals to become *zamlers* [collectors]. Just as Dubnow had appealed to his readers, so now YIVO issued calls for its supporters to gather materials in their hometowns and cities around the world and send them to the institute's Vilna headquarters.

The response to YIVO's requests quickly exceeded all expectations. By March 1926 supporters had sent 3,000 items to the Ethnographic Commission.<sup>12</sup> While the initiative to collect folklore was the most successful, *zamlers* gathered a range of material including bibliographic data for the Bibliographic Commission, Yiddish vocabulary for the Terminological Commission, historical documents for the Historical Section, and statistics for the Economic-Statistical Section. Networks of *zamlers* were concentrated in Poland and the Baltics but developed in Yiddish-speaking communities throughout the world. By 1929 there were 163 *zamlerkrayzn* [collectors circles] working on the institute's behalf and the Ethnographic Commission had accessioned 50,000 items of folklore.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to building the YIVO collections, the *zamlers* played a crucial

role in generating funds to support the institute's work. YIVO's founders initially hoped that the Polish state would cover a significant portion of its budget under the provisions of the Minorities Treaties. Yet the Polish national government seldom fulfilled its treaty obligations and formally abrogated them in 1934. Shtif's initial appeals to Yiddish activists in Berlin and New York show his expectation of major support from the relatively affluent Jewish communities of Western Europe and the United States. While American organizations did cover a large percentage of YIVO's budget until the onset of the Great Depression, however, Jewish philanthropic aid was never forthcoming on the scale that the founders had hoped.

Thus the institute turned to its grassroots supporters in Vilna, Poland, and throughout the world. It argued that since YIVO functioned as the equivalent of a national language academy, library, and university it would normally be funded by tax dollars. Since Yiddish-speaking Jews had no state that could impose taxes, they had a duty to pay a kind of voluntary tax to support their national institutions. As Elias Tcherikower put it in a fundraising speech, "We have become the folk's Ministry of Education. The folk must become our Ministry of Finance!"<sup>14</sup> In fact, members of the folk responded to the institute's appeals in large numbers. Local governments and Jewish *kehillahs* [communal authorities] in Poland also provided small subsidies, which YIVO took as an acknowledgement of the institute's national status. Yet the general impoverishment of Eastern Europe in the interwar period meant that these sums covered only a small portion of YIVO's budget, and the institute always struggled to finance its activities.

Given these difficult economic conditions the dedication of the zamlers was all the more remarkable. In 1927 the *Yedies* praised the "devoted zamlers who saved their last pennies in order to help the work of YIVO. People who live in great need nevertheless manage to send regularly very heavy packages with various materials . . ." <sup>15</sup> A 1929 survey found that over a third of zamlers were

manual laborers or merchants, while students and teachers comprised another quarter.<sup>16</sup> Correspondence preserved today in the YIVO Archives provides a vivid picture of the challenges these collectors faced in their work. Some wrote in between waiting on customers in their shops, asking for small sums of money to buy paper and stamps so that they could record and mail their contributions to Vilna.

While YIVO often spoke of its desire to “serve the folk,” the success of its zamler initiatives shows that the institute had indeed forged a bond with ordinary Jews. These individuals often faced poverty and antisemitism in their daily lives, yet through their work for YIVO they felt they were contributing to a great cultural undertaking. As one put it, “With joy I proclaim myself a porter of clay, sand, and brick for the palace of the people called the Yiddish Scientific Institute.”<sup>17</sup> A Warsaw newspaper wrote that “ninety-nine percent” of the zamlers were “simple, barely educated or entirely uneducated workers” who “wring out of their lives of hunger a wonderful crown of Yiddish scholarship.”<sup>18</sup> Despite the element of hyperbole in such formulations, YIVO did demonstrate how to create scholarship about the folk in partnership with the folk itself.

For YIVO, “serving the folk” meant not only studying ordinary Jews but also producing research that would benefit the broad Jewish public. In the view of Diaspora nationalists, YIVO’s work to standardize and develop Yiddish helped to raise the status of the language and thus promote recognition of Yiddish-speaking Jewry and its culture. Thus even specialized studies of Yiddish terminology or orthography aided the larger “Yiddish nation” by advancing the cause of Jewish national rights. More concretely, the Economic-Statistical Section investigated matters such as contemporary employment and migration patterns that had very real implications by the 1930s, a time when European Jews faced rising impoverishment and persecution. Yet members of the Historical Section argued that even research on distant eras had a role to play in addressing present-day



concerns. The historian Emanuel Ringelblum, a leader of the section, described doing “work that intends not simply to make known the Jewish past but which will serve as a support in the struggle that the Jewish community is carrying out in Poland for its national and social liberation.”<sup>19</sup>

For YIVO’s scholarship to truly help the folk it had to be accessible to a wide audience. The institute’s leaders often affirmed their commitment to producing work not only for scholars and intellectuals but for ordinary men and women. For years they discussed a number of publications designed for the general public, such as study guides that could be used at home for self-education, yet they also feared lowering their academic standards for the sake of popularization. Since YIVO always faced severe budget constraints it could only carry out a fraction of its proposed projects. Thus in practice it prioritized more strictly scholarly publications such as the series of *Shriftn* [Writings] produced by each of its four research sections.

An even greater tension in YIVO’s work was over the role of politics. Given the plethora of competing Jewish ideologies in interwar Eastern Europe and the intensity of debates within Jewish society, it is hardly surprising that such conflicts impacted the institute. While YIVO’s leaders were committed to addressing issues of immediate import to the Jewish public, they were equally determined to avoid taking openly political stances. Maintaining this balance was one of the central challenges facing the institute throughout its history. Even at the time of YIVO’s founding arguments erupted over just how close it should come to embracing a particular political camp, and these arguments continued and even intensified over the next two decades.

While YIVO often described itself as a non-partisan institution, its roots clearly lay in the ideology of Diaspora nationalism and its founders were all affiliated with one or another stream of that movement. Many YIVO supporters

and certain leaders, in particular those based in Warsaw, were loyal to one of two socialist parties: the Diaspora nationalist Jewish Labor Bund or the left wing of *Poale Zion* [Workers of Zion], which balanced commitments to the Diaspora and to Zionism. Members of these parties often pressured the institute to support socialist causes, yet such calls were consistently rejected by YIVO's main figures in Vilna.

These tensions are revealed in YIVO's relationship to TSYSHO (Yiddish acronym for Central Yiddish School Organization), the largest network of Yiddish secular schools in Eastern Europe. Yiddish activists saw the work of the two institutions as closely linked, with YIVO serving as a capstone to the TSYSHO network. TSYSHO leaders viewed an academy for Yiddish scholarship as a necessary complement to their own work. They hoped it would fill such practical functions as setting standards for the Yiddish used in their classrooms and producing teaching materials in the language.

YIVO, in turn, regarded the Yiddish secular schools as crucial to its own success. Members of the Psychological-Pedagogical Section used the schools as research sites, observing the development of Yiddish-speaking pupils. More broadly, YIVO looked to TSYSHO as training the first generation of students to receive a systematic, modern education in its mother tongue. These young people were equipped with the skills to appreciate Yiddish scholarship and imbued with the values of secular Jewish culture and Diaspora nationalism. YIVO thus saw TSYSHO pupils and graduates as the audience for its work and the core of its future support. In fact, the Yiddish schools often encouraged students to work on behalf of YIVO, often by collecting materials as part of homework assignments. In this way teachers would “accustom them from the school bench on to take an active part . . . in general cultural-social work.”<sup>20</sup>

YIVO and TSYSHO did collaborate in several ways, for example by organizing joint fundraising campaigns in the difficult economic conditions of the

interwar period. YIVO also assisted the schools by sponsoring a series of teacher training courses in the late 1930s. Nevertheless, their relationship was always fraught. One reason was that YIVO disappointed TSYSHO leaders by never fulfilling plans to publish educational materials, choosing instead to devote resources to more strictly scholarly projects. Another was that on several occasions YIVO declined to join in expressions of support for Yiddish schools that were harassed by the Polish government. Since TSYSHO was seen as closer to the socialist camp, YIVO leaders were wary of being too much allied with the secular school movement and thus tarred with the same brush.<sup>21</sup> Thus despite their affinity and to the frustration of many, YIVO set limits on its public identification with TSYSHO.

To critics within YIVO such a position was an abdication of the institute's mission to "serve the folk." In their view the folk meant ordinary workers, whose interests were only truly represented by socialist parties. In addition, Marxists such as the historian Raphael Mahler argued that all scholarship inevitably bore the imprint of class bias, so YIVO would do best to adopt openly a class-conscious approach in its work. A majority of YIVO's leaders, however, maintained that the institute could only fulfill its mandate if it embraced the entire folk and did not alienate a segment of the Jewish public with controversial political positions. It also upheld Dubnow's principle that "neutrality in social questions is after all the holiest principle of scholarship."<sup>22</sup>

While such debates played out among the institute's supporters, its external critics were even more fierce. Only a few months before YIVO began its activities in the fall of 1925 Zionists founded their own center for Jewish research, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In the same years the Soviet government sponsored academies for Yiddish scholarship in Minsk and Kiev, while in Warsaw the Instytut Nauk Judaistycznych [Institute for Jewish Studies] carried out its work in Polish and Hebrew. Thus YIVO operated alongside similar institutions

rooted in Zionist, communist, and liberal worldviews. At the same time, Orthodox Jews with no interest in secular scholarship in any of its guises sought to reinvigorate traditional Jewish study through institutions such as the Yeshivas Hakhme Lublin [Rabbinical Academy of the Scholars of Lublin].

Supporters of the Hebrew University often accused YIVO of hostility to Zionism and Hebrew, while YIVO attacked the Instytut Nauk Judaistycznych for its supposed assimilationist agenda. By contrast YIVO began on friendly terms with the Soviet academies, which focused on similar research topics and published in the same language. In this period the Soviet policy of support for its minority cultures seemed like the realization of Diaspora nationalists' highest aspirations. Many Jewish activists in Poland looked with envy at the Soviet academies, where Yiddish scholars pursued their work with government funding. In fact, it was the promise of a secure post in Kiev that lured Nokhem Shtif to abandon YIVO in spring 1926 just as his long anticipated plan was finally being realized. Yet by the late 1920s Soviet authorities became increasingly repressive and scholars found it difficult to maintain professional contacts abroad. Soviet researchers were eventually forced to denounce their YIVO colleagues as promoting "fascisized Yiddishism," thus demonstrating the dangers of unchecked political partisanship.<sup>23</sup>

After a few years of energetic work YIVO celebrated its achievements and laid the cornerstone of its Vilna headquarters at its first international conference in October 1929. Yet only days later the Wall Street crash set off an international economic crisis. In the following years donations to YIVO plunged, particularly from the United States, while renovation costs for the headquarters climbed.

While completing its new home nearly bankrupted the institute, by the mid 1930s YIVO was recovering and even expanding its programs. It established new divisions such as an Art Section inaugurated with an exhibit of engravings by

Marc Chagall. It also fulfilled the last major element of Shtif's memorandum in 1934 by founding a teaching component called the Aspirantur. Although much more modest in size and scope than a Yiddish university, the Aspirantur provided advanced training to a small number of students in the areas of YIVO's research. The institute thus finally completed all the "rungs on the pedagogical ladder" begun by TSYSHO, allowing Jewish youth to receive a modern education in Yiddish from pre-school to graduate studies. In this way YIVO hoped to prepare a future generation of Yiddish scholars.

That same year Max Weinreich's growing interest in cutting edge social science disciplines such as sociology and psychology led to the creation of the Division of Youth Research. The division brought an innovative, interdisciplinary approach to studying the problems of Jewish young people at a time when antisemitism and unemployment made many apprehensive about their future in Eastern Europe. It organized a series of autobiography contests, calling on adolescents and youth to record their life stories, with prizes awarded to the best entries.

As hundreds of responses arrived in Vilna, the division amassed a unique data set for its research that today provides a candid, intimate look at the lives of ordinary Jewish youth on the eve of the Holocaust. Like the zamler initiatives, the autobiography contests again demonstrated YIVO's technique of documenting the lives of the folk through the folk's own efforts. Moreover, they sent a powerful message to young Jews who often felt a sense of hopelessness: that their own experiences were of crucial importance to the further development of Jewish culture.

In these trying times as conditions in Europe worsened, movements on the right and left of the political spectrum gained strength. Liberal Diaspora nationalists felt increasingly besieged and criticism of YIVO mounted both outside and inside the institute. In particular, many on the left called ever more

insistently for YIVO to ally openly with the socialist camp against the looming threat of fascism. To them, YIVO's cherished principle of neutrality seemed like a cowardly attempt to avoid the most burning questions of the day.

Yet the institute's leaders argued that in periods of crisis rigorous scholarship was more important than ever, for only through objective analysis could YIVO accurately assess the challenges facing Jews and begin to formulate an effective response. Thus rather than a luxury in difficult times, YIVO's work was a pressing necessity. Simon Dubnow asked rhetorically whether one stopped studying geology during an earthquake, while the linguist Yudel Mark compared the institute to "a lighthouse in the rough seas of our bitter present."<sup>24</sup>

Thus in the late 1930s YIVO renewed its commitment to work for the folk, devoting more attention to pressing issues of broad public interest. It finally realized some of the popular publications it had long discussed, launching the journal *Di yidishe ekonomik* [Jewish Economics] in 1937. This journal promised to study such timely problems as Jewish migration "not with prepared social schemes or with ready political ideologies, but by providing comprehensive, objective, verified material about the life of the masses."<sup>25</sup>

YIVO's leaders also argued that scholarship helped maintain morale and continue the fight for Jewish dignity. For example, the historian Isaiah Trunk wrote that his 1939 study of a medieval Polish city had direct contemporary relevance:

This book appears at a time when the rights of the Jewish population of Poland are disputed – at a time when reactionaries consider Polish Jews, who have lived in the country for centuries, as foreigners. This book shows that Jews are no foreigners in Poland who arrived yesterday.<sup>26</sup>

It was with this sense of determination that YIVO's scholars faced an

uncertain future. In 1938 Weinreich expressed a sense of foreboding when he mused, “What will be later? We do not know. The skies are so overcast with clouds. It is possible that later we will consider our time as the good years.” Yet he concluded, “I believe that YIVO can serve as an example of what can still be created in such storms ... we will resist and overcome to spite all our enemies.”<sup>27</sup>

Of course, YIVO’s leaders could not hold off the catastrophe that would soon engulf European Jewry. Yet their belief in the importance of scholarship and cultural preservation continued to inspire Jews even during the Holocaust itself. In Vilna members of the so-called “Paper Brigade,” which included former YIVO staff, risked their lives to rescue remnants of the institute’s collections from Nazi plunder. In the Warsaw Ghetto Emanuel Ringelblum created the Oyneg Shabes archive, the most extensive effort to document Jewish life under Nazi rule.

In 1940 YIVO transferred its headquarters to its New York branch. In this way it became one of very few East European Jewish institutions to re-establish itself in the wake of World War II. In the United States YIVO continued its work under the direction of Max Weinreich, its only leader to survive into the post-war period. There it grappled with the decimation of the “Yiddish nation” that it had pledged to serve. Yet as different as conditions in post-war America were from interwar Poland, Weinreich insisted that the tools of scholarship were just as relevant in YIVO’s new home. He continued the institute’s commitment to both past and present, honoring the legacy of Eastern Europe while addressing the needs of contemporary American Jews.

Today YIVO carries on its work in New York as the world’s largest repository of material on the Yiddish language and East European Jewish culture. Its history demonstrates the possibilities and pitfalls of combining academia and nationalism, culture and politics, objectivity and engagement. While it no longer commands the loyalty of millions of Yiddish speakers, it shows us all how

scholarship can serve as a powerful tool for creating a modern identity.

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<sup>2</sup> Yudel Mark, "Di ershte yorn fun yivo (a kapitl zikhroynes)," *Di tsukunft* 81, no.4 (April 1975): 131–132.

<sup>3</sup> This description is broadly schematic. In the movement's early years, some Zionists supported the notion of a Jewish homeland in a territory other than Palestine. After the failure of the proposal to accept Uganda as a Jewish homeland in 1903, they split to form the Territorialist movement. Zionists also varied greatly in the importance they attributed to Hebrew culture as well as to work in the Diaspora. At the same time, while all Diaspora nationalists supported Yiddish they varied in the weight they placed on language in their overall conception of Jewish identity.

<sup>4</sup> Nokhem Shtif, "Vegn a yidishn akademishn institut," in *Di organizatsye fun der yidisher visnshaft* (Vilna: TSBK and VILBIG, 1925), 25.

<sup>5</sup> "A vokh farn idishn visnshaftlekh institut," unidentified clipping, Latvia, 1928, RG 1.1, Records of YIVO (Vilna): Administration, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, folder 516.

<sup>6</sup> This essay was published in both Russian and Hebrew. See S. M. Dubnow, "Ob izuchenii istorii russkikh evreev i ob uchrezhdenii russko-evreiskago istoricheskago obshchestva," *Voskhod* 4, no. 9 (April–September 1891): 1–91 and *Ibid.*, "Nahpesah ve-nahkorah," *Pardes* 1 (1891): 221–42.

<sup>7</sup> See Shtif, "Vegn."

<sup>8</sup> N. Pereperkovitch, "Unzere shprakh-gilgulim," *Folk un visnshaft*, Riga, 8 October 1925, RG 82, Tcherikower Archive (YIVO, Vilna), YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, folder 2388.

<sup>9</sup> *Der alvettlekher tsuzamenfor fun yidishn visnshaftlekh institut* (Vilna: YIVO, 1936), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Shtif, "Vegn," 31–32.

<sup>11</sup> *Yedies* 57–58 (August–September 1936): 16.

<sup>12</sup> Press release, 9 March 1926, RG 82, folder 2401; Organizational Committee, Vilna to Organizational Committee, Berlin, 6 March 1926, RG 82, folder 2401.

<sup>13</sup> *Yivo bleter* XLVI (1980): 321–323; *Barikht fun der konferents fun dem yivo* (Vilna: YIVO, 1930), 67.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Zosa Szajkowski, "Der yivo un zayne grinders," *Yivo bleter* XLVI (1980): 62.

<sup>15</sup> *Yedies* 22 (29 July 1927).

<sup>16</sup> *Barikht*, 65.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in *Yedies* 10 (12 March 1926).

<sup>18</sup> "Grandieze oyftuen fun yidishn visnshaftlekh institut," *Naye folkstsaytung* (Warsaw), 12 December 1926, clipping, RG 1.1, folder 516.



<sup>19</sup> E. R[ingelblum], “Dray yor seminar far yidisher geshikhte,” *Yunger historiker* 1 (1926): 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Yedies* 27 (1 April 1929).

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that, as recent research has shown, there was also a debate within the ranks of TSYSHO between those more closely identified with socialist political parties – primarily the Bund – and those who favored a non-partisan stance. See Yuu Nishimura, “On the cultural front: The Bund and the Yiddish secular school movement in interwar Poland,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 43 no. 3 (2013): 265–281.

<sup>22</sup> Protocol 159, Meeting of Executive Office, 23 August 1934, RG 82, folder 2220.

<sup>23</sup> See *Fashizirter yidishizm un zayn visnshaft* (Minsk: Belorussian Academy of Sciences, 1930).

<sup>24</sup> *Alveltlekher tsuzamenfor*, 14 and 141.

<sup>25</sup> *Di yidische ekonomik*, no. 1 (May 1937): 1–3.

<sup>26</sup> Isaiah Trunk, *Geshikhte fun yidn in plotsk, 1237–1657* (Warsaw: YIVO, 1939), v.

<sup>27</sup> Minutes of scholarly meeting, 19 April 1938, RG 1.1, folder 15.