

# A History of YIVO's Prewar Archival Collections from 1925 to 2001

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## INTRODUCTION

January 2022 marked the completion of the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections Project, a seven-year, \$7 million undertaking to digitize the holdings of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research collected in its Vilna headquarters between 1925 and the Nazi occupation of Vilna in 1941. These 1.5 million pages of archival documents had been looted by the Nazis, saved from destruction, and dispersed among YIVO, in New York, and three Lithuanian institutions—the Lithuanian Central State Archives, the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences, and the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania. What remains of YIVO's prewar collection is now fully accessible to researchers for the first time since World War II.<sup>1</sup>

From the heroic acts of individuals during the Holocaust to prevent the material from being destroyed, to YIVO's efforts to prove ownership of its recovered collections after the war, to trying to gain access to YIVO materials discovered in Lithuania only after the fall of the Soviet Union, bringing this project to fruition was not easy. The wartime years and subsequent restitution of materials to YIVO has been well-documented in several scholarly sources (Dawidowicz 1989; Fishman 2017; Kuznitz 2014). However, no formal account has ever been published of YIVO's efforts to gain access to its prewar collection materials discovered in Lithuania throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. What follows is part one of a two-part history of that period, accompanied by a guide to the key players (appendix).

## YIVO IN VILNA: A BRIEF HISTORY

YIVO was founded in 1925 with its main headquarters in Wilno, Poland (later Vilnius, Lithuania, and referred to in Jewish sources as Vilna), by a group of Jewish scholars, writers, and other intellectuals who recognized the importance of researching and teaching Jewish history, languages, and culture. Influenced heavily by the methodology of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement to study the products of Jewish culture and religion, but resisting the assimilationist goals of the *Wissenschaft* scholars in Germany, early proponents of YIVO considered it critical to save the documentary history of East European Jewry. That material would then be used as a foundation for creating a new Jewish culture that would ensure Jewish continuity even in the face of modernity. Such an institute, the founders believed, would need to serve not only as a

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1. The collections can be accessed at [vlnacollections.yivo.org](http://vlnacollections.yivo.org).

central body to coordinate research efforts, employ scholars, and train students, but also as the main repository for acquiring, housing, and cataloging the materials collected by the Eastern European Jewish masses.<sup>2</sup>

YIVO's activities were divided among four sections: the Philological Section, which examined language, literature, and folklore, and included the work of the YIVO Ethnographic Commission; the Economic-Statistical Section, which studied and produced scholarship on contemporary demographic and economic trends; the Historical Section, which produced scholarship on Jews in Eastern Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, with particular attention to the more recent past and the experiences of the Jewish masses; and the Psychological-Pedagogical Section, whose focus was contemporary pedagogy and Jewish children and youth. In order to fulfill its mandate to gather and preserve the material of everyday Jewish life which each section used as the basis of its respective research, YIVO created an international network of volunteer collectors, or *zamlers* in Yiddish, who could gather documents, objects, and answers to questionnaires within their local communities (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1.** Folklorist and *zamlers* Shmuel Lehman and his students interviewing an elderly woman, Warsaw, 1931. Territorial Photograph Collection, RG 120, 4686.01. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

YIVO continued to collect, publish, and train scholars from its founding throughout much of 1939. In September of that year, the Soviets captured Vilna. They arrested and murdered Zalmen Reyzen, one of the institution's founders and an instrumental leader in all of YIVO's work. YIVO continued to function from October 1939 to June 1940 under the control of the Lithuanian authorities in Vilna. When the Soviets retook the city in June, YIVO was absorbed into the government-run Institute of Lithuanian Studies. In January 1941, YIVO was renamed the Institute of Jewish Culture and was made part of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania.

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2. For an excellent and comprehensive history of prewar YIVO see Kuznitz 2014.

The Nazis captured Vilna in June 1941, and by 1942, members of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, the Nazi taskforce charged with looting Jewish cultural property for the Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question in Frankfurt, had converted the YIVO building into a sorting center for looted books and archival materials. Forced laborers from the Vilna ghetto—among them individuals who were closely aligned with YIVO including two Yiddish poets, Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski—were tasked with sorting the materials from YIVO’s collection and deciding what would be sent to Frankfurt and what would be sent to the pulping mills (Figure 2). Intent on saving YIVO’s cultural treasures by whatever means possible, Sutzkever and Kaczerginski led a group that would come to be known as the Paper Brigade. Those individuals risked their lives by smuggling whatever materials they could out of the YIVO building and into the Vilna Ghetto, hiding precious books and documents in various bunkers around the ghetto in the hopes that these materials would go undetected until the end of the war. Members of the Paper Brigade continued their activities until the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto in September 1943.<sup>3</sup>



**Fig. 2.** Forced laborers sorting through books in the YIVO building, Vilna, ca. 1943. YIVO Institutional Records, RG 100, 1942.2. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

By July 1944, after the liberation of Vilna by the Soviets, the YIVO building was in ruins, destroyed during the bombing of the city. With it, whatever materials remained in the attic—another of the Paper Brigade’s hiding places—were also destroyed. Although some of the other hiding places had been discovered and the materials there burned, several of the bunkers within the Vilna Ghetto remained intact. Almost immediately after the liberation of Vilna, Sutzkever and Kaczerginski, among the few surviving members of the Paper Brigade, would begin recovering those hidden materials. Some of the material would eventually be sent to the new YIVO headquarters in New York.

3. Zelig Kalmanovitch, among the Jewish forced laborers, believed the materials packed for Frankfurt would be safe from destruction and would be possible to retrieve after the war. See Fishman 2017, 65–66, 80–81, 227.

## YIVO IN NEW YORK: RESTITUTION OF MATERIALS BY THE UNITED STATES ARMY

In 1946, a large cache of Jewish books and documents that had been sent to Frankfurt was found at the Offenbach Archival Depot by the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Division of the United States Army, or the “Monuments Men” as they are better known today. Those materials were placed in the charge of Colonel Seymour Pomrenze. The US Army’s initial intention was to distribute Jewish books to the libraries of the Displaced Persons camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy via the American Joint Distribution Committee (Joint). In order to aid in those efforts, Lucy Dawidowicz, a former research fellow of YIVO in Vilna, was sent to Germany as a member of the Joint’s overseas education department to sift through the books and locate which ones could be sent to the Displaced Persons camps. Among the tens of thousands of books and documents, Dawidowicz began identifying those that clearly belonged to YIVO. She and Pomrenze would both aid in YIVO’s attempts to have those materials sent to New York, where YIVO’s headquarters had moved in 1940 (Sinkoff 2016; 2020).

The cultural artifacts that the Monuments Men had recovered were meant to be returned to the countries from which they were taken. In the case of YIVO’s collections, this was complicated by the fact that the materials were collected in Vilna, Poland, but looted when Vilna was part of Lithuania while under the control of the USSR. To make matters more difficult, unlike most other Jewish institutions in Europe that had been destroyed and their entire communities wiped out, YIVO had survived the war intact as an institution, though nearly all its staff and most of its supporters in Europe had been murdered.

The first task in YIVO seeking restitution of its materials was to prove the relationship between YIVO in Vilna and YIVO in New York, in order to show that there was an unbroken chain of succession between the two headquarters. According to an affidavit by Max Weinreich—one of the few surviving YIVO staff who was also among the Vilna headquarters’ founders and the institute’s director in Vilna—the executive board of YIVO convened in August 1939 and unanimously resolved to transfer YIVO headquarters from Vilna to New York City, where its *Amerikaner opteyl*, or “*Amopteyl*” (American Section) had been operating as the Society of Friends of the YIVO in the United States. The decision was made in light of the increasingly dire situation and threat of war in Europe. The board also voted at that time to relocate the library and archives of YIVO to New York (Weinreich Affidavit 1947, Records of U.S. Occupation Headquarters, YIVO OAD 18).

Soon after that meeting, Weinreich left for Belgium to attend a linguistics conference and on his way became stranded in Copenhagen for several months. When he was finally able to make contact with his colleagues in Vilna in October 1939, after the restoration of postal and telephone communications, he was informed by Zelig Kalmanovitch, another member of the YIVO executive board, that the August decision to transfer YIVO’s headquarters and materials had been confirmed by both the executive and the central board votes. Weinreich was then formally invited by the *Amopteyl* to serve as its director. In June 1940, the YIVO board in Vilna officially informed

the Amopteyl that it was formally transferring all its rights and privileges to the executive board in the United States. By doing so, everything that was the property of YIVO in Vilna officially became the property of YIVO in New York (Restitution 1947, Records of U.S. Occupation Headquarters, YIVO OAD 18).

Weinreich's second task was identifying those materials that had belonged to YIVO before the war, an undertaking made more difficult by the fact that thousands of books and materials bore the stamps of their original owners or creators rather than that of YIVO. Many of the collections, Weinreich explained, were from institutions and from individuals who had been intimately involved with YIVO during its fifteen years of existence in Vilna, as staff members, collectors who regularly sent in materials, or collaborators on various initiatives. Some of those collections had been taken to YIVO at the start of the war, out of fear for the fate of the materials and because of their planned transfer to the new headquarters in New York, though the physical transfer of materials to New York was not ultimately able to occur.

The following collections were included in Weinreich's list, along with detailed information on when and how the collections were transferred to YIVO:

- The Library and Archives of the Jewish Teachers Institute (transferred in the late 1920s)
- The S. Anski Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society of Vilna (transferred throughout the 1930s)
- The famed Strashun Library (merged with YIVO in 1939)<sup>4</sup>
- The library and archives of Simon Dubnow (bequeathed in the late 1920s)
- The library and archive of Zalmen Reisen (bequeathed in 1936)
- The library of Shloyme Bastomski (donated by his wife after his death in 1940)
- Yehudah Leib Cahan collection of 2,000 books on folklore and ethnology (sent to YIVO in Vilna from the American branch of YIVO in 1937)
- The library of Moshe Lerer (transferred by Lerer from his apartment on the YIVO campus just before the erection of the Vilna Ghetto)
- The library of Zelig Kalmanovitch (transferred at the beginning of the German occupation of Vilna)
- The library of Alfred Landau (bequeathed in 1935)
- The library of Pinchas Kon (transferred in 1938)
- The library of Max Weinreich (donated in the summer of 1940). Max Weinreich's library of 7,000 books were among those that did not bear the stamp of the institution he directed.

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4. See Rabinowitz 2018, which challenges this assertion.

In a series of decisions, the United States government ruled that the New York headquarters was the legal successor to YIVO in Vilna and that the materials in YIVO Vilna's possession had indeed been legally transferred to YIVO in New York. Following those rulings, 420 cases of YIVO materials left the Offenbach Archival Depot on three freight cars bound for Bremen on June 18, 1947. Three days later, the cases left the port of Bremen, bound for their permanent home at YIVO in New York (YIVO Shipment 1947, Records of U.S. Occupation Headquarters, YIVO OAD 18; Figure 3).



**Fig. 3.** Opening crates of salvaged YIVO treasures from Europe, New York, 1947. YIVO Administrative Records, RG 100, 1947.2. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

## LITHUANIA, 1989: DISCOVERY OF YIVO MATERIALS

For over forty years, YIVO accepted that whatever had been recovered by the Monuments Men, along with the materials sent to YIVO by Sutzkever and Kaczerginski in the immediate postwar period, were all that the institute would ever be able to salvage of its vast prewar collection. Then the Soviet Union began to crumble.

It seemed possible that YIVO could make inquiries into the fate of its still-lost archives. Due in no small measure to political developments in the Soviet Union that allowed for increased communication between Jewish organizations in the West and Jewish groups in the Soviet Union, YIVO was able to make initial contact with the Jewish Cultural Society of Lithuania. Founded in 1989, that organization emerged in the wake of Lithuanian liberation from Soviet rule. Through correspondence with Emanuelis Zingeris, the elected chairman of the Jewish Cultural Society, YIVO eventually ascertained that a large cache of books and archival documents belonging to

YIVO had been found among the books and periodicals housed in what was until that time the Book Chamber of the Lithuanian SSR.<sup>5</sup>

A delegation from YIVO, including the executive director at the time, Samuel Norich, and YIVO's long-time chief archivist, Marek Web, traveled to Vilnius in March 1989 to attend the founding conference of the Jewish Cultural Society of Lithuania. During the visit, YIVO representatives were taken to the book chamber and shown thousands of documents and books identified as being part of YIVO's prewar collection. They also viewed what they believed to be YIVO's prewar newspaper collection, the remnant of what was once tens of thousands of Jewish periodicals from around the world (Norich to Davidson 1990, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

Upon initial inspection, YIVO estimated that there were approximately 15,000 pages stored in the book chamber, believed to be between five and 10 percent of YIVO's prewar holdings. The majority of the materials were complementary fragments of several collections now held by YIVO in New York, those which had been found in Frankfurt and sent to YIVO in 1947. According to YIVO's estimate at the time of initial viewing, 40 percent of the materials in the book chamber were YIVO administrative records. Those records included the correspondence of two of YIVO's founders, Reyzen and Weinreich, as well as records of YIVO's various sections and commissions, most notably the Ethnographic Commission. In addition to those materials, Web claimed that the book chamber possessed "probably the largest collection in the world of Jewish press from the territory of Lithuania (including prewar Wilno province, which was part of Poland)." YIVO believed that the collections were some of the materials that had been discarded by the Nazis during their looting of the institution but had not made it to the paper mills (Web 1990, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

## THE VILNA JEWISH MUSEUM: SAVING YIVO MATERIALS ONCE MORE

Until YIVO's visit in 1989, no one in the institution knew what had happened to the remainder of its materials, let alone that they were still in existence (Norich to Davidson 1990, YIVO Vilna Transfer). Just how those materials made their way to the book chamber was not immediately known, but over the next several years various pieces of the puzzle were assembled, and a fuller picture began to emerge of the heroic efforts to save those Jewish cultural treasures. YIVO ascertained that the materials had first been found and collected by Sutzkever and Kaczgerinski immediately after the war. On July 26, 1944, only 13 days after the liberation of Vilna, the two had established the Commission to Collect and Systematize Documents of Jewish Culture. That operation would eventually become the Vilna Jewish Museum under the control of the Ministry of Culture of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (Fishman 2015, 7). Scouring the city along with a small, unpaid staff, the two began digging up materials from the bunkers in the Vilna Ghetto (Figure 4, next page). They also discovered YIVO materials at one of the paper mills as well as in the courtyard of the Vilnius Municipal Trash Administration, where the Nazis had

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5. Established in 1945, the book chamber was responsible for cataloging, preserving, and documenting in a national bibliography all books published in Lithuania.

dumped tons of Jewish material that they were unable to destroy before the Soviet advance (Fishman 2016, 169). Over the next five years, not only did the museum continue to gather YIVO's prewar Jewish materials, but it also began to collect materials that documented the Holocaust.



**Fig. 4.** Abraham Sutzkever, an unidentified man, and Gershon Abramowicz bringing YIVO materials hidden during the war to the new Vilna Jewish Museum, Vilna, 1944. Abraham Sutzkever-Szmerke Kaczerginski Vilna Ghetto Collection, RG 223.1, folder 710. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

materials. Defying those orders, Ulpis hid parts of these collections within the recesses of the book chamber. Very few individuals knew of Ulpis's efforts to preserve the Jewish archival materials secretly hidden in the book chamber, even during the period of de-Stalinization when Ulpis had arranged for the Jewish books left there to be cataloged. Ulpis rarely drew attention to what he had done, and only decades later, with the discovery of these materials, did Ulpis's deed come to light (Fishman 2015, 10).

## FIRST ATTEMPTS AT ESTABLISHING A JOINT ACCESS PROJECT

The control the Soviet Union once had over all its archives, which had limited or entirely cut off access, had now been loosened. The ease with which YIVO had gained access to the book chamber was taken as a sign that the institution would also be granted access to the state and local

From its founding, the museum had not been fully supported by the Lithuanian Soviet authorities. They provided no financial backing for salaries, office supplies, or vehicles to transport materials. In addition, they agreed to allow the museum to occupy only the building that formerly housed the ghetto library. Amidst increased Soviet anti-Jewish policy and censorship, Sutzkever first and later Kaczerginski understood that the Soviet Union was no place for these Jewish remnants. Both believed that the materials that had been saved from the Nazis would need to be saved again. They began sending packages of whatever materials they could to YIVO in New York. By 1946, in the wake of Soviet pressure, both had fled the city. The Vilna Jewish Museum continued to operate until 1949, when it was officially shut down and ransacked by the KGB.

After the Vilna Jewish Museum was shut down, the collections housed there were transported by the Soviet authorities to the book chamber. During the years of Stalinist terror, the director of the book chamber, Lithuanian librarian Antanas Ulpis, was ordered to destroy all Jewish



archival repositories in Vilnius. Perhaps for those reasons, the seeds of what would eventually become the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections Project took root almost immediately after the discovery of YIVO materials in Lithuania. YIVO expressed earnest hope that a mutually beneficial joint project could be developed between YIVO in New York and the Goskomizdat (State Committee for Publishing), which at that time controlled all Lithuanian archival repositories. In addition to the bureaucratic difficulties that existed in working with any archives that had been under Soviet control for decades, practical concerns were involved in undertaking a project like this in Lithuania: lack of equipment and supplies; staff shortages; and most important, the inability to find individuals with the skills and historical knowledge to work with the collections. YIVO proposed to address those problems by providing financial and technical support (Web to Bronislavas 1990, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

A second YIVO visit was made to Lithuania in June 1989. This time the YIVO representatives were invited as guests of Goskomizdat. In their negotiations with Jouzas Nekrosius, chairman of Goskomizdat between 1973 and 1990, YIVO had proposed that the documents belonging to YIVO be returned as an act of friendship and good will, so they could be integrated into YIVO's collection (Norich to Davidson 1990, YIVO Vilna Transfer). In exchange, YIVO was willing to make microfilm copies of all its prewar materials housed in New York for deposit in Vilnius. YIVO also proposed leaving all books and periodicals in Lithuania, regardless of provenance, to be housed in the soon-to-be-reestablished Lithuanian Jewish State Museum, underwritten by Emanuelis Zingeris and the Jewish Cultural Society of Lithuania. Mr. Nekrosius rejected YIVO's proposals but agreed to allow YIVO to photocopy all materials housed in the book chamber, though at that time no formal agreement had been created or signed (Norich to Matlock 1990, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

## LITHUANIAN CENTRAL STATE ARCHIVES AND CENTRAL HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: A SECOND DISCOVERY

A third visit to Lithuania in December 1990 revealed another cache of materials. The Lithuanian Central State Archives<sup>6</sup> held what YIVO's chief archivist Marek Web believed was 30 to 40 percent of YIVO's prewar collections. Although it was unclear how the materials had made their way there, it was thought that, like those found in the book chamber, they had been part of the postwar Jewish Museum collection in 1947 and were transferred to the archives after the museum closed. An initial inspection revealed that most of the materials were created either by YIVO or by the S. Anski Historical and Ethnographic Societies in Vilna and Kaunas, whose records

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6. The Lithuanian Central State Archives was established in 1921 in Independent Lithuania in Kaunas. During the Soviet period, a system of state archives was formed and coordinated in 1960. The name of the entity that controlled these archives was changed several times over the course of three decades. During the Soviet period, this organization was first called the Board of Archives under the Council of Ministers of the Lithuanian SSR (1960) and then the Chief Board of Archives under the Council of Ministers of the Lithuanian SSR (1980). In April 1990, after Lithuanian independence was restored, the General Directorate of Archives of Lithuania under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania was established, replacing the Chief Board of Archives. In April 1995, it was reorganized into the Lithuanian Archives Department under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania. For more, see <https://www.archyvai.lt/lt/apie-lvat/trumpa-istaigos-istorija.html>.

had been transferred to YIVO at various points throughout the 1930s (Norich to Matlock 1990, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

It became clear that YIVO's collections had been dispersed among three institutions in Lithuania: the Lithuanian Central State Archives, the Central Historical Archives (both under the control of the Main Archives Administration of Lithuania), and the book chamber.<sup>7</sup> At YIVO's request, a survey of materials discovered in Vilnius had been undertaken by Mrs. Esther Majerovicus, a prewar graduate of the Jewish schools and a professional archivist, who had been employed by the Central State Archives for twenty years. YIVO eventually created a list of over fifty collections at the Central State Archives and Central Historical Archives to which YIVO wished to gain access (Microfilming of Vilna Records 1990, YIVO Vilna Transfer). Of those, 22 were identified as having belonged to YIVO before the war. Those records at the Central State Archives included the following:

- The Records of the YIVO Institute, 1925–1939
- The Records of the Jewish Community Board, Vilna 1919–1940
- Yiddish Theater in Poland/ Lithuania
- Tarbut Society in Vilna, 1920–1940
- Tarbut Teachers' Seminary, Vilna 1921–1939
- Shul-kult (Yiddish Educational) Society, Vilna 1928-1940
- Yiddish Gymnasium, 1918–1939
- Gurevitch Yiddish Elementary School 1925-1928
- Va'ad HaYeshivot, 1935–1940
- Jewish Professional Associations, 1920–1940

At the Central Historical Archives materials included the records of the following organizations:

- Jewish Community Board, Vilna, 1804–1917
- Rabbinical School in Vilna, 1847–1901
- Teachers' Institute in Vilna, 1873–1915
- Vilna Kehillah, 1764–1921
- Russian Orthodox Consistory for Lithuania, 1589–1942<sup>8</sup>

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7. Materials were grouped into several categories: Records of Jewish provenance, including Jewish organizations and institutions such as population registries administered by the local rabbinate (none of those were targeted for microfilming for unknown reasons); Governmental records of state agencies (1795–1939), including many files pertaining to Jewish affairs; Records of the Holocaust period including materials of Jewish provenance from ghettos and from German agencies.

8. At the time, and to this day, YIVO has only a small fraction of this collection, approximately 150 out of the 17,379 files in the collection. YIVO's holdings pertain only to the files of Jewish converts.

- Administration of the State Schools in the Vilna Province, 1863–1915<sup>9</sup>

YIVO's then executive director, Samuel Norich, attempted to gain support from various Lithuanian and US government officials to back YIVO's claim to those materials by explaining that the project would increase access to unknown materials. He suggested that the project would also show the American Jewish community that Lithuania had positive attitudes and intentions towards the Jews. In addition, YIVO claimed that tourism to places that were part of the former Soviet republic, such as Lithuania, depended a great deal on scholarly cooperation between newly-democratic states and major academic centers in the United States to create political goodwill (Nadler to Web, Ellenberg, Fuchs, and Norich 1992, YIVO Vilna Transfer). YIVO was eventually able to secure support from Romualdas Ozalas, a leader of Sajudis, the political organization that had led the struggle for Lithuanian independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Ozalas, who had been named to the Politburo of the Lithuanian Communist Party, expressed support for YIVO's claim to its collections and even offered to help persuade the Lithuanian authorities to recognize YIVO's right to the materials (Norich to Matlock 1990, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

In July 1990, His Excellency Vytautas Landsbergis, who became chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania in March 1990 after the restoration of Lithuanian independence, was invited to the United States as a guest of the YIVO Institute to attend its annual dinner. Along with the invitation, YIVO requested that Landsbergis aid them in establishing a formal agreement for microfilming the YIVO materials housed in Vilnius (Norich to Landsbergis 1990, YIVO Vilna Transfer). By that point, YIVO had tabled its initial desire to have the materials sent to New York, as it was clear that any restitution attempts were not likely to succeed.<sup>10</sup>

## AGREEMENT BETWEEN YIVO AND THE MAIN ARCHIVES ADMINISTRATION

After various meetings, negotiations, and interventions, an initial agreement was drafted in May 1990 between YIVO and Mr. Bronislovas Vonsavicius, chief of the Main Archives Administration of Lithuania (MAA), the entity that oversaw both the Central State Archives and the Central Historical Archives. The agreement confirmed MAA's readiness to begin a microfilming project. From the start, however, the project was fraught with difficulties. Before any official document was signed, there was a dispute regarding the cost of the project. YIVO agreed to provide all necessary microfilming equipment and supplies, and to cover expenses incurred for staff and the costs of developing the film. In exchange, YIVO asked the MAA to agree to microfilm at cost, by its estimate \$0.15 per frame plus an additional charge of \$17 to \$30 per roll for positive copies.<sup>11</sup> MAA proposed \$0.40 to \$0.50 per frame, a cost that YIVO was unwilling to accept. YIVO's

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9. YIVO also only had partial records, those specifically of the Jewish schools. See Web 1990.

10. Instead, they hoped to be able to establish what YIVO envisioned would be a five-year project, with 250,000 pages being microfilmed each year.

11. Positive microfilm reels, appearing as black text on a white background, are made from copying the master-negative reels (white text on a black background). Master negatives are the highest quality images. Duplicate copies of master negatives often have a reduction in quality and legibility.

initial draft also stated that the microfilm equipment it purchased for use at the archives would remain in YIVO's possession until the completion of the project, at which point it would be donated to the MAA. Should the project be suspended, the agreement specified that all equipment would be returned to YIVO (Norich to Vonsavicius 1991, YIVO Vilna Transfer).<sup>12</sup>

YIVO's draft agreement stipulated that the aim of the project was to "locate and restore to YIVO those collections which belonged to the YIVO Institute at its Vilnius headquarters prior to World War II, and also to enrich YIVO's documentary resources in the fields of the history and culture of Eastern European Jewry by obtaining access to other important Jewish materials in the Lithuanian State Archives." When the draft was returned to YIVO in February 1991, it contained many changes that were distressing to YIVO, according to Norich's return letter to Vonsavicius. For example, the agreement now referred to YIVO's prewar collections as "the national property of the Lithuanian republic." Further, the purpose of the project was now defined as moving to "improve the material and technical basis of the Lithuanian archives, to supplement Lithuanian archives with new documents of Lithuanian history and to supplement YIVO archives..." (Norich to Vonsavicius 1991, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

There was also disagreement about just what materials would be included in the agreement. The initial list compiled in 1990 contained 22 collections, all of which had been identified by YIVO as having belonged to the institution before the war. However, by the time a version of the agreement was signed by YIVO in 1991 and sent back to the MAA for final approval, an additional 29 collections had been added to the list of materials to be microfilmed. The additional records were those of the Lithuanian civil administration and Lithuanian police under the Nazis. Although those materials were not the property of YIVO, their inclusion could help reconstruct the history of Lithuanian Jews during that period. YIVO claimed it desired to film only the records that related directly to the Jewish community and had no interest in any information related to Lithuanian citizens. As it turned out, the addition of those 29 collections would be the project's undoing (Web 1992).

When Web traveled to Vilnius in September 1991, with the intention of solidifying the details of the microfilming project and determining which parts of the World War II records were of interest, the Central State Archives refused to allow him to look at the collections. The addition of the wartime-era materials by YIVO had been widely protested by the staff of the archives, which had drafted a petition objecting to YIVO's microfilming project. The animosity toward the project seems to have stemmed as much from a strong disagreement between the MAA and the Central State Archives as from the aversion to including the World War II records. The Lithuanian Central State Archives believed that the MAA had an obligation to consult them before making any agreements regarding materials in their care, and the Central State Archives claimed that they would not show any outsider the materials unless they were given direct orders by the Prokuratura (Prosecutor General's Office). There were also concerns that YIVO's true motivation for try-

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12. The MAA however, would only ever agree to include in the agreement that YIVO agreed to "purchase and give over to the Main Archives Administration the necessary equipment..."

ing to gain access to the war records was to examine potentially incriminating information about Lithuanian citizens during the Holocaust. The petition was formally submitted to the Lithuanian Government (Report 1991, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

Even though Vonsavicius had claimed that keeping the records inaccessible would not be tolerated and would be seen as reverting to the “old bad times,” YIVO and its allies in the Lithuanian government were unable to make real gains to implement the project as originally intended. Instead, YIVO was painted as a duplicitous institution that had tried to trick the Central State Archives into giving up wartime records by adding them only to later iterations of the list of collections to be microfilmed (Report 1991, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

Negotiations regarding the project stalled in September 1991, after the Lithuanian government issued blanket exonerations to all Lithuanians who had been accused in Soviet courts of Nazi collaboration. The move was widely protested by the United States Government and by American Jewish organizations, exacerbating the Central State Archives’ mistrust of YIVO’s motivation for gaining access to the wartime records.

Talks about the project eventually resumed, after YIVO had withdrawn its request to gain access to the contested materials. A second, revised agreement was signed in February 1992. At that time, the deputy prime minister of Lithuania officially announced the government’s support of the project. However, just as YIVO started preparing for the project to begin by securing funding and purchasing equipment, the political climate in Lithuania swung far to the right. YIVO was informed immediately after the government turnover that Vonsavicius was stepping down as general director of the MAA and that Aleksandras Guobys would be taking over.

Shortly thereafter, YIVO was informed by Guobys and the MAA that the project would need to be delayed again, and in fact an attempt was made to cancel the agreement altogether. Several factors were cited by Guobys for suspending the agreement, including the fact that the materials listed had not been processed in any way and therefore could not be microfilmed. Guobys also claimed that the privatization of Lithuanian property and the introduction of new Lithuanian national currency prevented the project from moving forward (Guobys to Norich 1992, YIVO Vilna Transfer). Other reasons for nullifying the agreement were cited, including the fact that there was no parity between the MAA, a government agency, and YIVO, a private entity, and therefore no deal should have ever been made. In addition, the Central State Archives claimed that the agreement had not been approved by the minister of foreign affairs and that the Justice/Procurator General’s Office needed to sign off on the project (Web to Slovin, Nadler, Ellenberg 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

After years of failed negotiations, YIVO was no closer to gaining access to its original materials than it had been prior to their discovery. To complicate matters, YIVO had been awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant in June 1991 for \$185,000, with YIVO

supplying \$94,000 in matching funds. That financial support would have covered the first two years of what YIVO had declared was a five-year microfilming project. Nearly two years after being awarded the grant, YIVO had not been able to spend any of the funds because the project was completely stalled.

On April 19, 1993, YIVO was sent a letter that canceled the agreement. The letter stated that after a reassessment of the project, it was decided that the MAA had overstepped its authority in signing the 1991 agreement with YIVO. The letter stated that the project was not dead, but rather that new, mutually agreeable terms needed to be found (Ilgunas to Web 1993). YIVO was informed that a new agreement was being written—this time one that would follow the law of the Republic of Lithuania (Vilnius Notes 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

## MARTYNAS MAŽVYDAS NATIONAL LIBRARY OF LITHUANIA: A DISCOVERY AND A NEW AGREEMENT

After it became clear that the collaboration with the Lithuanian Archives would not move forward in a timely manner, the most pressing issue became what to do about the NEH grant. NEH had given YIVO the opportunity to suggest another project to which the funds could be applied, as long as it was an international, joint project that would take place in Eastern Europe or a

former Soviet republic, and would result in expanded access to a significant body of archival materials (Web to Slovin, Nadler, Ellenberg 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer).



**Fig. 5.** YIVO materials at the Lithuanian Central State Archives, ca. 2017. YIVO Institutional Records, RG 100. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

YIVO decided to shift focus to the National Library of Lithuania, which was then the custodian of the materials originally housed in the book chamber (NEH Revised 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer). In addition to the original 15,000 pages, there was also a large cache of materials discovered there in the summer of 1993 (Nadler to Bulavas 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer). Like the materials originally found in the book chamber in 1989, and those located in the Central State Archives, the newly found archival materials were badly damaged and unprocessed, and had been crammed into 100 cardboard boxes with no arrangement (Figure 5). They included YIVO's office and financial records, correspondence, research materials, and scholarly manuscripts; accounts of pogroms; records of TSYSHO (Yiddish School Associ-

ation); Yiddish Actors Union records; photographs of Yiddish personalities, shtetls, theater productions, and communal organizations; and *pinkasim* (communal record books) from various Jewish communities (Nadler 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

Urgency to begin the project derived not only from the desire to retain the NEH funds. Public opinion about YIVO was extremely negative at that point, five years into a project that never began. In addition, Fira Bramson, the longtime librarian of the book chamber, and YIVO's closest and most sympathetic inside contact, would be immigrating to Israel. The fear of not beginning the project before Fira Bramson and other members of the Jewish community in Vilnius left for Israel stemmed largely from YIVO's belief that Zingeris might attempt to "rescue" the materials from the National Library by incorporating them into the newly revived Jewish Museum, thereby cutting YIVO out of the equation altogether (Fishman to Nadler and Baker 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

A November 1993 draft agreement between the National Library of Lithuania and YIVO stated that the National Library did not have staff capable of properly processing the Jewish materials in their possession. It also acknowledged YIVO's historical ties to Vilnius and its position as the foremost center for research on the history and culture of the Jews of Eastern Europe. As such, the agreement stipulated that YIVO would assist in processing the materials at the National Library of Lithuania, send staff and interns to perform the work, and provide all appropriate equipment and software to carry out the project. For its part, the National Library would provide YIVO staff with workspaces in the library, and upon completion of the processing project, would ship the prewar YIVO materials in its possession to YIVO in New York. A provision was added that the shipment of materials to YIVO would be subject to the approval of the Lithuanian government.<sup>13</sup> Shortly after the agreement was drafted, the Lithuanian authorities refused to approve the shipment of any materials to YIVO (Nadler to Bulavas 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

Outside observers cautioned YIVO that its direct negotiations and offer of generous professional and financial support would never progress because of the unstable political climate in Lithuania. With the revolving door of Lithuanian archives and library directors, none of them would agree to terms that would suggest that materials were being given away for too low a price. In addition, in Lithuania and much of the former Soviet Republic, value was not placed on the right of public access to materials as it was in the United States. YIVO was advised to enlist the help of Congress to involve the State Department so that terms of transfer could be worked out between the two governments (Levine to Nadler and Web 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer). There was also talk of pursuing a legal approach regarding the restitution of the documents. Others at YIVO believed that getting politicians like Al Gore and Bill Clinton to intercede on YIVO's behalf was the best tactic (Minutes 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

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13. The agreement also stipulated that the National Library would offer YIVO a selection of duplicates from the nineteenth and twentieth century non-Lithuanian imprints and triplicates of Lithuanian imprints. That was also subject to government approval.

Ultimately, Bruce Slovin, chairman of the YIVO Board at the time, proposed to Mr. Algirdas Brazauskas, president of the Republic of Lithuania, that the National Library send materials to New York so that YIVO could arrange, inventory, chemically process, and copy the materials and then send the originals back to Lithuania. Rather than forsake the opportunity to gain access to these collections, YIVO claimed to be “sensitive to Lithuania’s legitimate need to protect against exportation of Lithuanian national cultural treasures” (Slovin to Brazauskas 1993, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

Slovin’s plan seemed to have worked, and a second agreement was signed by YIVO and the National Library in January 1994. That draft stipulated that the National Library would begin to ship materials to YIVO to be conserved, processed, and photocopied. By that point, the NEH funding had been forfeited, so YIVO agreed to bear all costs of the project and to send a complete inventory of all archival materials to the National Library. The National Library would then be given the opportunity to have returned to them whatever materials it deemed worthy of keeping in its collection. The implication was that both parties would be entering into the agreement with the understanding that most of the materials would remain in New York (Preservation Agreement 1994, YIVO Vilna Transfer). Ultimately, much as the Central State Archives had done with the materials in its possession, the National Library was quick to back out of any agreement with YIVO, explaining that the cancellation of the project was a financial decision (Bulavas to Nadler 1994, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

## A SECOND AGREEMENT WITH THE LITHUANIAN CENTRAL STATE ARCHIVES

Over the next year, YIVO continued its appeal to various Lithuanian authorities to persuade any of the institutions that were in possession of YIVO archival materials to reinstate a prior agreement. Finally, the Lithuanian Central State Archives agreed to send the materials in its possession to YIVO with the understanding that YIVO would fully preserve, arrange, and describe the materials. YIVO would then create photocopies for its archives and send all originals back to Lithuania.

YIVO began receiving materials from the Lithuanian Central State Archives in February 1995. The first shipment contained 57,949 pages of documents, which YIVO had agreed to conserve and process within one year. From the start, however, it was clear that the timeline was overly ambitious, and that YIVO would be unable to meet the deadline. Many of the materials were in poor physical condition—wrinkled, brittle, torn, and dirty. The materials were not arranged in any systematic way and many of the folders contained only fragments. For those reasons, YIVO was able to conserve, process, and photocopy only 13,000 pages within the allotted time, and requested an additional year to complete work on the initial shipment (Work Completed 1996, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

After a delay due to YIVO’s failure to complete the processing of the first round of materials, a second shipment of 28 cartons was received in January 1996. The second shipment was much



like the first that had arrived: it contained “a lot of fragments, some unimportant records and office materials and a considerable number of significant complements to our existing collections (e.g. Lithuanian Jewish communities, vaad ha-yeshives, etc.) posters, important individual letters and other assorted rare gems—all in terrible condition and chaotically packed, with no system of arrangement. Whatsoever” (Nadler to Web and Baker 1995, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

And much as with the first shipment and the ones that would come to YIVO over the next several years, YIVO was consistently late with project deliverables. As of April 1999, YIVO was still in possession of over 35,000 pages of the 150,000 that had arrived over the course of the project. YIVO used its relocation to the newly established Center for Jewish History as the reason for the delay in the work, and cited the poor physical conditions that necessitated extreme preservation methods (Web to Slovin 1999, YIVO Vilna Transfer). The director of the Lithuanian Central State Archives repeatedly sent letters to YIVO expressing displeasure at YIVO’s failure to return the papers, as well as concern that the agreement was being deliberately violated by YIVO (Cepas to Web 1999, YIVO Vilna Transfer).

Although the Lithuanian Central State Archives threatened legal and political action, and repeatedly took its gripes to newspapers both in Lithuania and the United States, YIVO remained largely unfazed. Instead, YIVO claimed that its sole responsibility and the impetus behind all its actions were caring properly for the materials (Web to Slovin 1999, YIVO Vilna Transfer). In an open letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, which had run a piece about the project, ostensibly backing Lithuania’s claim to the materials, YIVO wrote:

Your suggestion that keeping the books in Lithuania would serve as “an inspiration to a city still struggling to overcome decades of repression and enforced denial of its own history” is naïve. Their content—Rabbinic law and Jewish history—is in no way connected to Lithuanian history and culture... After more than a half century of abysmal neglect of the Judaic treasures that remained hidden in Europe, this remarkable collection must be re-unified, for the sake of both justice and scholarship. (Nadler 1996)

The photocopying project with the Central State Archives officially concluded in 2001, as the last shipment of materials was returned to Lithuania. However, the relationship between YIVO and the Lithuanian Central State Archives, and by extension, with the other Lithuanian institutions that held YIVO materials, was in a state of disrepair. There was essentially no interaction between YIVO and those institutions for over a decade. YIVO largely gave up hope of gaining access to the rest of its materials in Lithuania.

Then, in 2014, the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections Project was born. The development and completion of that project will be addressed in a forthcoming essay.

## APPENDIX: GUIDE TO KEY PLAYERS

### **YIVO**<sup>14</sup>

- Max Weinreich, founder, Director in Vilna and New York (1925–1969)
- Zalmen Reyzen, founder (Vilna, 1925–1941)
- Zelig Kalmanovitch, Executive Board member and staff member (Vilna, 1928–1943)
- Samuel Norich, Executive Director (New York, 1980–1992)
- Marek Web, Chief Archivist (New York, 1969–2021)
- Bruce Slovin, Board Chairman (New York, 1985–present)

### **PAPER BRIGADE (1942–1943)**

- Abraham Sutzkever, leader
- Shmerke Kaczerginski, leader

### **VILNA JEWISH MUSEUM (1944–1949)**

- Abraham Sutzkever, founder
- Shmerke Kaczerginski, founder

### **MONUMENTS, FINE ARTS, AND ARCHIVES DIVISION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY (1943–1946)**

- Colonel Seymour Pomrenze, Judaica expert
- Lucy Dawidowicz, former YIVO research fellow, book sorter at Offenbach Archival Depot

### **JEWISH CULTURAL SOCIETY OF LITHUANIA, ESTABLISHED 1989**

- Emanuelis Zingeris, elected chairman

### **GOSKOMIZDAT (STATE COMMITTEE FOR PUBLISHING), CONTROLLED THE BOOK CHAMBER OF THE LITHUANIAN SSR (1949–1991)**

- Jouzas Nekrosius, Chairman of Goskomizdat, 1973–1990
  - **Book Chamber of the Lithuanian SSR (1944–1989)**
    - Antanas Ulpis, Director (1946–1980)

### **MAIN ARCHIVES ADMINISTRATION OF LITHUANIA, CONTROLLED ALL LITHUANIAN ARCHIVES**

- Bronislovas Vonsavicius, Chief Archivist (1990–1992)
- Aleksandras Guobys, Vonsavicius' successor, 1992
  - Lithuanian Central State Archives
  - Central Historical Archives

### **MARTYNAS MAŽVYDAS NATIONAL LIBRARY OF LITHUANIA, SUCCESSOR TO BOOK CHAMBER, ESTABLISHED 1989**

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14. Dates are inclusive of institutional affiliation. Exact titles and positions within YIVO shifted over the years for each individual.

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