

OPERATING ON FAITH: YIVO'S EIGHTY YEARS

Marek Web

Eighty years ago, in 1925, a group of Jewish intellectuals from Vilna, Berlin, and New York City determined to found a research institute that would be home to the study of the Yiddish language and of the people for whom Yiddish was their mother tongue. At that time there were 11 million Jews in countries around the globe who claimed allegiance to the extraterritorial "Yiddishland". To those speakers, Yiddish was an expression of their national culture, a tool of national creativity.

"Yiddish culture, as it has developed in the late nineteenth century," writes Lucy Dawidowicz in her memoir *From That Place and Time*, "offered a secular alternative to the culture of traditional Judaism. It had produced a brilliant literature and a lively prolific journalism that flourished in Eastern Europe and its immigrant outposts, especially in the United States...It was inevitable that those who regarded Yiddish as a Jewish national language and a vehicle of Jewish continuity should want to create an institution of higher learning in Yiddish."

The proponents of the new institute, which they named *Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut* - YIVO (Jewish Scientific Institute) believed that history was on their side. In the aftermath of the First World War the European powers imposed throughout the continent previously unheard of laws regarding minority rights to self-determination and to national cultural autonomy. The newly formed states of Eastern Europe, each with a large Jewish minority, detested such requirements, yet they nevertheless were forced to include pertinent articles in their constitutions. The Jews of Eastern Europe might have believed at this point that their dreams, be it Zionism, Territorialism, or Diaspora Nationalism, were about to be realized. The YIVO founders, all devoted Yiddishists, put their trust in the future and went to work bringing their cherished goal to life.

In fact, the proposed institute did not look to be a realistic proposition: there was no real property, no endowment or other financial backing, not even enough money to mail the letters in which they pleaded for support. Indeed, in the beginning all that they had were two documents in which the idea of a Yiddish academic institute was spelled out. The first was a tiny brochure entitled "*Vegn a yidishn akademishn institut*" (About a Yiddish Academic Institute), written in 1924 by the philologist Nokhum Shtif. Eight typewritten copies were circulated in Berlin, Vilna, New York and Paris among Yiddish intellectuals whose help in gathering support for the cause was anticipated.

The other document, "*Vilner tezisn vegn dem yidishn akademishn institute*" (Vilna Theses About a Yiddish Academic Institute), was a summary of the March 24, 1925 meeting held by Yiddish teachers in Vilna, at which Shtif's proposal was discussed and approved. Max Weinreich, an instructor at the Vilna Jewish Teachers' Seminary, who

from the beginning was a staunch supporter of the project, wrote the report. Basically these two documents contained a blueprint of the future YIVO.

The first spark of enthusiasm from the Vilna teachers meant probably a lot for the tiny group of dreamers headed by Shtif and Weinreich, but more support was initially either not forthcoming or tepid at best. The truth, known all too well to every Yiddish writer or scholar, was that there were few if any in the Jewish establishment ready to back such a lofty fantasy at a time when the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe in whose behalf the institute was being created, were steeped in crushing poverty. No one expressed it more succinctly than Simon Dubnow, a guiding light to Yiddish intelligentsia, a personal friend of the proponents, and the future Chairman of YIVO's Honorary Curatorium:

We can surely have a meeting in Berlin, maybe even a convention – but what next? This, and a couple of well-meaning resolutions may be all that we will be left with. First you need to find a wealthy man who will give a few tens of thousands of dollars for the institute (...) and then two-three years later down the road we would pray to God that ...the benefactor would not go bankrupt and would not drag with him the institute. I do not see any material basis for such enterprise...

With large donations not forthcoming, there had to be something else that made Max Weinreich and his colleagues unwavering in their resolve to bring the institute to life. That “something” was faith. Lucy Dawidowicz notes:

The YIVO operated on faith...The Yiddishists who created [it] in 1925 had deep faith in its future. The faith not only overcame the objections of skeptics, but even enabled the founders to surmount the financial obstacles of the time...without financial resources it exploited its intellectual and scholarly resources drawing upon a whole generation of university-trained Jewish scholars in a wide variety of disciplines.

But what exactly did they put their faith in? Cecile E. Kuznitz, a young historian who wrote her dissertation at Stanford University on the subject of the YIVO Institute in Vilna and its relation to Yiddish scholarship, explains it thus:

YIVO was born in the wake of the First World War, at a moment when modern Yiddish culture was on the verge of its fullest flowering. As the most prestigious institution of its cultural movement YIVO went far beyond collecting historical documents or publishing academic monographs to play a central role in the redefinition of Jewish peoplehood in modern times... By focusing on a future time when their ... vision of Jewish scholarship would be within reach, YIVO leaders were able to look beyond current economic and political marginalization and preserve their faith in their vision of Jewish culture.

And so, with little else but faith, a second gathering, this time in Berlin on August 7-12, 1925 (nine people in attendance) which called themselves *forbaratung* (preliminary

conference) declared that, while the time was not yet ripe for a full-scale founding convention, the work toward the goal of creating the institute must begin right now, and they asked Max Weinreich to take the first steps. On his return to Vilna, Weinreich assigned a room in his apartment to serve as the YIVO's temporary quarters, and that was that: the *Yidisher visnshaflekher institut* was born. A couple of months later, a space was rented for the fledgling institute in which it remained for the next eight years. In 1933, YIVO's own building on 18 Wiwulski Street opened its door, bringing to the new halls the many treasures, which it amassed for its library and archives in the space of just a few years.

YIVO scholarship was of the practical kind. Its focus was on the *folk*, the masses whose education were YIVO's primary goal. As a research center, YIVO concentrated on studying the present conditions, which prevailed among the Jewish people. Language, contemporary culture, ethnography, sociology, psychology – those were the disciplines utilized by YIVO researchers who in the fifteen years of YIVO's existence in Vilna poured forth 2500 publications.

Fruma Mohrer and Roberta Newman note in the introduction to the exhibition “YIVO at 75: Milestones and Treasures”:

YIVO offered a different answer to the dilemmas of modern Jewish life, one grounded in the tradition earlier established by the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment): the dissemination of modern culture to the Jewish masses. It saw itself as an educator of the folk, but also as a serious research academy that would focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people as a topic of study. By giving the people back their own history YIVO's founders hoped to raise their national consciousness and encourage their feeling of pride.

Thinking about YIVO during these first fifteen years, one is astonished by the great number of things accomplished in such a short time. There were the research sections, each with its own program of research work; the library and the archives, both begun from the scratch and both already famous for their volume and contents; a Yiddish theater museum; networks of volunteers, the YIVO *zamlers* organized in 500 circles around the world who collected printed matter, and historical and ethnographic documents for the YIVO collections; contests for young people to write their autobiographies; and academic-level courses, the *aspirantur* for young Yiddish scholars. By the end of this period YIVO's fame and recognition assumed worldwide proportions.

In 1938 on its 13th anniversary YIVO's board resolved to construct a new wing, to be finished in 1940, because the existing quarters were so cramped that there was no more space for new books and archival collections. Max Weinreich commented, “YIVO indeed appears as healthy as a bar-mitzvah boy but its pants are too short”.

But by 1940 the Vilna YIVO was under Soviet control, and a year later, in the Nazi-occupied Vilna, the YIVO was no more.

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Under the Nazis, the house on the Wiwulski Street where the YIVO thrived before the war was turned into “the Ponar of our Jewish culture”, as Abraham Sutzkever wrote. There, under the German guard, twenty Jews were brought each day from the Vilna ghetto, “to dig the graves for our soul”. The annihilation of Jewish Vilna was two-pronged. The people – the YIVO workers among them – perished in the Ponary killing grounds, on the streets of the ghetto, and in the concentration camps in Estonia; at the same time YIVO’s books, manuscripts, artifacts, as well as collections from other libraries from Vilna and surrounding towns, were dumped at the YIVO, then a Nazi depot for looted collections, where some were selected for shipment to Germany and the rest were marked for destruction.

In these darkest times of wholesale death and destruction, one thing that could not be extinguished was faith. What else would propel the Jews working at 18 Wiwulski Street, those members of the “paper brigade” as they were known in the ghetto, to snatch from under their Nazi guards’ noses priceless records of the Jewish past and at considerable risk to their lives, hide them in secret places or entrust them to their Lithuanian friends. Today we read as an article of faith these words written by Zelig Kalmanovich in his diary on August 23, 1943, exactly one month before the final liquidation of the Vilna ghetto: “Our work is reaching its conclusion. Thousands of books are being dumped as trash and the Jewish books will be liquidated. Whatever part we can rescue, will be saved with God’s help. We will find it when we return as human beings”.

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Halfway around the globe from Vilna, despair and faith mixed as the YIVO leaders, some of them refugees from the war-torn Europe and the others members of the *Amopteyl* (YIVO American Branch), resolved in September 1940 to establish YIVO headquarters, “for the duration of the hostilities” in New York City. Max Weinreich was among them, a recent arrival from Europe whom the *Farvaltung* of the Vilna YIVO directed to go to the United States to do whatever possible for the survival of the Institute. The temporary measure became permanent within a short time, as hope for the recovery of the pre-war YIVO and return to normalcy evaporated. The nightmarish realization of what was happening in Vilna set in when the YIVO received via London a coded message from Emanuel Ringelblum in Warsaw, “Yivush Vivulski has died; his property is being ransacked”. For the remainder of the war the YIVO people had to concentrate on restoring the Institute to its pre-war status while being engulfed by the terrible news pouring in from Europe. The task to hold the YIVO steady fell first and foremost to Max Weinreich.

Let us go once again to Lucy Dawidowicz’s memoir in which she describes her association with the YIVO in the fateful years 1938 through 1947. This is how she records her impression of Max Weinreich in the Vilna period:

Now, as I reflect on the history of the YIVO in the light of my own experience in Vilna, I am convinced that notwithstanding the special and particular circumstances which made it possible to establish the YIVO in Vilna, it could not have come into being, even there, without Max Weinreich and his extraordinary willpower. To be sure, he couldn't have done it single-handedly, but he was its true enabler. His determination was a powerful engine ... and he had energy to spare to move others along with him. He could create worlds if he decided to do so.

Later writing about the New York years, she continues:

Max Weinreich strove to make the YIVO in the United States part of the universe of scholarship... It was his ambition to demonstrate to educated American Jews and to the community of American scholars that Yiddish...was a tongue fit for scholars and intellectuals. He wanted to show that Yiddish could serve as a medium of high scholarship and that the language and its culture were themselves suitable subjects for high scholarship. Accommodating the principles of Vilna YIVO to the realities of Jewish life in the United States he succeeded in his ambition in surprisingly short time... He fought the paralysis of depression. By dint of his will, he made the YIVO in New York a memorial to the YIVO in Vilna.

To Max Weinreich, the bond with the Vilna past was of paramount importance. He once said in his speech to a YIVO conference: "The fate of the world Jewry depends on how much will the Jews in Jerusalem, and Moscow, and Buenos Aires, and first of all in New York, immerse themselves in the spirit of *Yerushalayim d'Lita*".

A journalist visiting YIVO in 1975 was moved to write: "The guardians of YIVO's treasure have a deep sense of history and mission. The explanation of every YIVO function begins with tasks defined fifty years ago...with the fulfillment of dreams destroyed by the Holocaust. To understand what YIVO is today and wants to be tomorrow one must go back to the 1920s..." (Estelle Gilson in "Present Tense").

This, then, was the key to re-starting the YIVO in America: keeping alive the ties that bind the YIVO in America to its predecessor in Vilna; keeping YIVO as a research center of Yiddish in all its manifestations as the basic tool of Jewish national culture; maintaining a position of prominence in the study of East and Central European Jewry and in the collection and preservation of related library and archival collections. To this, new considerations were added to anchor the YIVO in the American-Jewish environment. Thus, on the one hand the YIVO would emphasize the influence of the East European Jewish heritage on the development of the American Jewish community, and on the other encourage general studies in Jewish Americana during the modern period.

All this, and also - the faith...

Faith was not easy to come by in the first years of YIVO's American existence. The war years were a time of unremitting despair over a world so tragically lost. But neither did the postwar years bring a full-scale redemption to the YIVO people, many of them war refugees and survivors. Remembrance of the horrors of the Holocaust, which they witnessed, was not a popular notion then, and, as the post-war years wore on, it was generally wished that this greatest of Jewish national catastrophes be relegated to history. The survivors were given to understand that they would do better if they suppressed their memories and started rebuilding their lives.

At that time YIVO was already well positioned to continue as a research institution of American Jewry. Its first successes included publication of Elias Tcherikower's history of the Jewish labor movement in the United States, and the American-Jewish immigrant autobiography contest. But at YIVO, the Holocaust was not in the past, as Vilna, Poland, Eastern Europe and its Jews were not in the past. Going against the tide the YIVO initiated a whole range of projects related to Holocaust history, which made YIVO the primary research and resource center in the United States on this period. This became especially evident in the late 1960s and after, as the Jewish community turned from forgetting to remembering the destruction of European Jewry, and Holocaust studies and remembrance gained traction among academics and the public. In those years every new initiative, be it individual research, commemoration, creation of a museum or a Holocaust research center, began usually with canvassing YIVO collections and publications for inspiration and documentation.

Faith, it turns out, sometimes can produce miracles, too. For the YIVO, recovery of its Vilna archival and library collections was one such miracle. Through the devotion and courage of YIVO workers and friends, along with sheer luck, blocks of the YIVO pre-war archives and library, the surviving remnant of a vibrant Yiddish civilization, surfaced after the war, in Vilna, in Frankfurt-am-Main, outside Marseilles, and most recently in the post-Soviet archives in Vilna, and were brought back to YIVO.

One article cannot encompass the many past and ongoing YIVO achievements in its American period – there are many and diverse, in the fields of folklore, literature, history, Yiddish linguistics, and sociology. The YIVO library has grown to more than 350,000 volumes in twelve major languages, the Archives to 22 million document pages. One who wishes to look deeply at this record would need to examine all 198 issues of the *Yedies/News of the YIVO* published since 1943, where YIVO projects, symposia, books, journals, exhibitions, archival accessions, library acquisitions, and public programs have been heralded. The reader of those pages will soon realize how forward-looking and community-oriented YIVO was and is in its projects and vision from one work project to the next.

There were – and there still are – dangers along the way. And the gravest of these pose a threat to the continuity of YIVO's mission. Dan Miron, at YIVO's 60th anniversary conference in 1985 expressed it thus: "Against the onslaughts of an unaccommodating cultural reality it became progressively more difficult to base one's work and intellectual existence on the belief in the living continuity of Yiddish; and yet, without such a belief,

the YIVO could not remain itself...At the same time none of the YIVO people, least of all Max Weinreich, ever allowed themselves to ... indulge in daydreams and wishful thinking.”

Max Weinreich thought that the answer to this dilemma is to attract the young and bring them into the *YIVO-krayz*, the YIVO circle of scholars and friends. In the late 1960s YIVO began offering graduate courses in Yiddish and Jewish studies to university students. The Uriel Weinreich Program in Yiddish Language, Literature and Culture was launched in 1968, and in 1969 the Max Weinreich Center for Advanced Jewish Studies was established. Both have had a long and successful run continuing into the present. Along the way, YIVO has witnessed the emergence of Yiddish and Jewish Studies programs around the country and world. Former YIVO students now teach Jewish Studies topics in a variety of schools. This is a cause for rejoicing, and also for reflection: what should YIVO’s role be in this new environment? Might YIVO be the victim of its own success because others have taken over elements of its mission? Is YIVO doing enough to keep its strengths from fading?

Eighty years from the time of its founding in Vilna —and 65 years since having taken root in America—YIVO is today going through transformations and change which will determine its ongoing place and role in Jewish scholarship. Settled within the campus of the Center For Jewish History its collections benefit greatly from being housed in the modern, well-appointed building. Its library and archival resources are easily accessible to the public through new technologies, on-line catalogs and electronic finding aids. In these new quarters YIVO is able to realize an ambitious and diverse program of public events.

And YIVO workers and associates are busy producing scholarly and educational tools, which will enrich the existing resources in Eastern European Jewish history and in Yiddish culture. As was reported in the most recent issues of the *Yedies/News of the YIVO*, work continues on innovative projects such as the multi-volume *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* and creation of the “Gruss-Lipper Digital Archive on Jewish life in Poland before the Holocaust”. The book of American-Jewish immigrant autobiographies from the YIVO Archives will be published in late 2005. And, as I write this article, the EPYC/ Educational Program on Yiddish Culture interactive website— mainly intended for high school students and teachers—has just been activated on the web. This is good news for the students involved but also for anyone interested in Yiddish culture, and in the Jewish milieu in which eighty years ago the YIVO was born.

Marek Web is currently a Senior Research Associate at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, after serving many years as Head Archivist.