



Simon Schama, historian and author of the BBC's five-part series *A History of the Jews*, has called the YIVO Institute the "embodiment of the collective memory of the Jewish people of Eastern Europe." The core of this memory is the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Collections. The project to preserve and digitize these materials will ensure their survival for generations to come; it will globally stimulate and disseminate new research and new knowledge; and, moreover, it will enable us to recover the memory of Jewish life in Eastern Europe and Russia shattered by the Holocaust.

This project is one of the essential undertakings of the Jewish people today for building Jewish identity and the Jewish future in America and around the world.

**Jonathan Brent**  
Executive Director

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# EDWARD BLANK THE YIVO VILNA COLLECTIONS PROJECT

Newsletter · January 2017

## About the Project

"THESE MATERIALS ARE HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS"

During World War II, the Nazis looted YIVO's archive and library in Vilnius, Lithuania. The Jews who were forced to sort the materials for ransacking by the Nazis risked their lives to smuggle some of the rare treasures to hiding places in the Vilna Ghetto. Much was destroyed, but soon after the war some of the materials were recovered by YIVO (by then relocated to the United States) with the help of the U.S. Army. Other items were recovered and rescued from the Soviets by a Lithuanian librarian, who hid them for over 40 years until they were rediscovered in 1988.

The Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Collections Project, launched in 2015, is a \$5.6 million, 7-year landmark digital initiative that has inspired funders, scholars, and lay people around the world. Our teams in Lithuania and New York are completing the processing, conservation, and digitization of these collections ahead of schedule.

This project reunites YIVO's divided prewar library and archival collections through a dedicated web portal. It is a partnership between the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the Lithuanian Central State Archives, and the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania.

YIVO has raised **\$5 million**  
out of **\$5.6 million**

**DIGITIZATION PROGRESS  
THROUGH DEC. 15, 2016**



**8,526**  
books digitized  
(1,466,858 pages)  
[Project goal: 11,700 books]



**307,507**  
pages of archival  
documents digitized  
[Project goal:  
Est. 1 million pages]

## News & Updates

### YIVO Receives Leadership Gift for the Project

The YIVO Institute is thrilled to announce a leadership gift from Edward Blank, retired New York telemarketing pioneer, to name The YIVO Vilna Collections, The Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Collections. Edward Blank remarked, "I am so proud to be able to help ensure the survival and accessibility of these historical records of Jewish civilization in Eastern Europe for future generations. This is my story, this is your story, this is everyone's story – one that has had a broad impact on our world." Mr. Blank's gift, along with other gifts, helps to satisfy 90% of the \$5.6 million needed for the project.

### The History and Future of the Strashun Library

Scholar and philanthropist Matisyahu Strashun's (1817-1885) collection of centuries-old rare Hebrew and Yiddish imprints and manuscripts became the basis for Vilna's Strashun Library, a Jewish cultural center from 1901-1941. During WWII, the Nazis forced Jewish intellectuals—including YIVO associates—to select and crate Jewish books from the library for the Institute for Study of the Jewish Question. In 1945, the U.S. Army found the books and sent them to YIVO in New York. The library's surviving components are being cataloged and digitized for the Project. YIVO opened an exhibition of rare books and documents from the original Strashun Library on January 22, with a conference, *The History and Future of the Strashun Library*. The conference discussed the importance of Strashun's private library, Jewish public culture in the Russian Empire, and the digitization of the library by YIVO.

## STAFF SPOTLIGHT



### Violet Lutz – Project Archivist

Dr. Violet Lutz holds a Ph.D. in Germanic Languages and Literatures from the University of Pennsylvania, and an MLS from Queens College, CUNY, with a concentration in Archives. She was a manuscripts cataloger in the Rare Book & Manuscripts Library at the University of Pennsylvania, and Special Collections Librarian at the German Society of Pennsylvania. From 2012 to 2015, she was a processing archivist at the Center for Jewish History. She is fluent in German, and has a reading knowledge of Yiddish and French. Since joining the project in June 2015, she has processed collections that are predominantly in German, including Jewish community records written mostly in old-style German handwriting (Kurrentschrift).

## Selected Artifacts · New Discoveries from the Vilna Collections



### ◀ Long-forgotten Memoir from American Jewish Comedian Eddie Cantor

Eddie Cantor (né Israel Itzkowitz, 1892-1964) was a radio and television star best known for his comedy routines, vaudeville, and his performance in the Ziegfield Follies. In the 1930s, he published a Yiddish memoir in New York City's Yiddish daily newspaper *Morgn Zhurnal* (in English, *The Jewish Daily*). Most of his 12-part memoir was rediscovered, yellowed and tattered, earlier this year in a box of uncatalogued theater reviews and letters, in the Esther Rokhl Kaminska Theater Museum Collection, part of the Vilna Collections. The memoir reveals details of his childhood years, marked by tragedy, resilience, and humor.

### A Package of Jewish Suffering: Hebrew Classic Reimagined in Yiddish

A 1901 Yiddish translation by prolific Hebrew and Yiddish writer Yehoshua Mezakh (1834-1917) of Solomon ibn Verga's classic Hebrew work *Shevet Yehudah* (The Staff of Judah). The classic was first printed in Turkey in the mid-16th century and was reprinted many times in many different places. It chronicles persecutions of Jews in different lands, and is an example of rabbinical writing on events in Jewish history. This book from the YIVO Library was once part of the famed Strashun Jewish public library in Vilna and is one of the many Yiddish works being digitized for the project.

### What Was Considered Funny Two Hundred Years Ago?

Among the early 19th-century books digitized for the project at the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania is an anthology called *Hundert un eyni anekdotin* (One Hundred and One Humorous Anecdotes), published in Vilna in 1823. At that time, there was not that much available to read in Yiddish. While most Yiddish books available were intended primarily for women, *Hundert un eyni anekdotin* was unique in that it openly appealed to a male readership. It promises to "give great pleasure to the anxious person when they have a free moment from their studies or work."

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\*AS OF JANUARY 1, 2017

