



The **Edward Blank**
YIVO Vilna Online Collections

Moishelle



LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

The Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections team has continued its exceptional work unabated throughout the past nine months of the COVID-19 pandemic under the superb leadership of Stefanie Halpern, Director of the YIVO Archives. The complex work of processing, conservation, and digitization has gone forward uninterrupted and with the enthusiasm and energy that bespeaks the tireless commitment of our YIVO staff. Their dedication is the mark of a vibrant institution, one of which I and the YIVO board are justly proud, as are many others in the global YIVO community. Our team's collective efforts continually affirm the vitality of YIVO's mission—preserving and disseminating the heritage of East European Jewish life. We honor their intensive work on the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections project much as we honor the sacrifices and dedication of those who came before us and who risked their lives to enable our access to these essential documents and artifacts.

I hope you will join me in expressing your appreciation, including by making a gift in support of the Project. We welcome your participation and partnership in our restoration efforts. I also hope that you will explore our Archives and Library, our public and educational programs, our exhibitions, and social media offerings. In these and so many ways, you can help us to ensure that the spirit of YIVO remains a living reality for generations to come.



JONATHAN BRENT
Executive Director & CEO

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- ▶ **vilnacollections.yivo.org/Donate**

COVER:

Handwritten music manuscript from a Yiddish operetta, ca. 1920.

before



Program cover for the Yiddish Press Ball in Warsaw, before and after conservation treatment, 1920s.



after

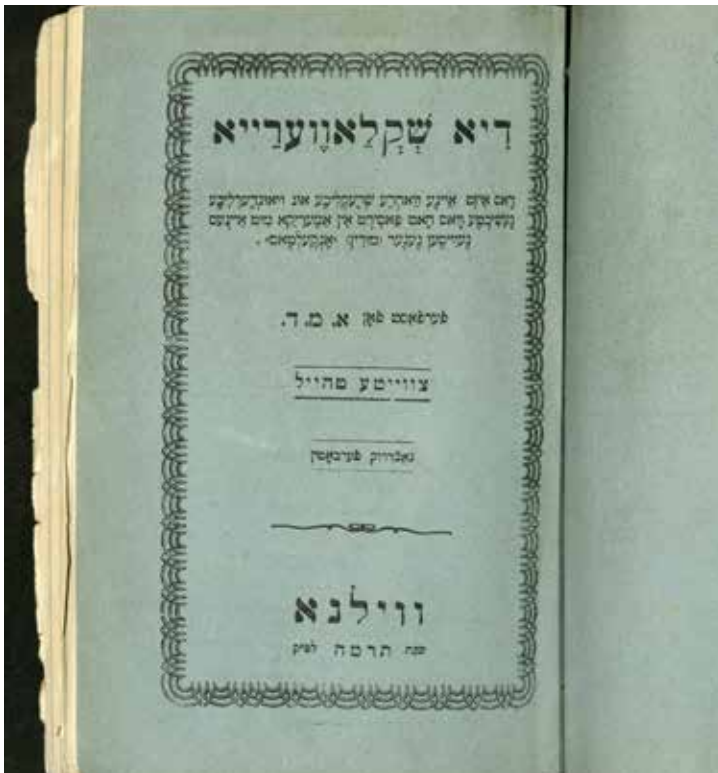
BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE

*The Edward Blank
YIVO Vilna Online
Collections*

**ARCHIVISTS & DIGITAL
EXPERTS STRIVE TO PRESERVE
A PRECIOUS HERITAGE**

The Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections project is a major seven-year initiative launched in 2015 to preserve, digitize, and virtually reunite YIVO's pre-war library and archives with materials located in institutions in Vilnius, Lithuania after World War II. This ambitious project is dedicated to conserving and digitizing myriad rare books and original artifacts, making them available for viewing on YIVO's website, free of charge. A boon to scholars, researchers, and the general public, these expansive holdings reflect wide-ranging aspects of Eastern European and Russian Jewish civilization. Among collection highlights are autobiographies of Jewish youth in Eastern Europe during the 1930s and the papers of Elias Tcherikower, a founder of YIVO and historian who described pogroms in Ukraine and the antisemitic impact of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The collection is unduplicated in its breadth and scope and will serve to educate future generations about a nearly lost Ashkenazi history and culture.

At the heart of these efforts is a close-knit YIVO team working together intensively to catalog, photograph, scan, and share materials of public and scholarly importance. Despite this year's pandemic, work on the Vilna project has continued. To date YIVO has digitized 100% of the library collections and 56% of the archival collections in New York. Visitors to vilnacollections.yivo.org/Collections-Online can find pre-war geometry textbooks, illustrated children's books such as



Bebl Bebl Bob, and records from the Yiddish Actors Union in Poland—just to start. Documents span numerous languages, leading with Yiddish, Russian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Polish, Hebrew, and English.

Stefanie Halpern, Director of the YIVO Archives, discussed the intricacies of preserving documents on such a large scale and the skill required to participate in this multi-step process: “It’s no easy feat to make sure that the process each of the documents goes through—from conservation and preservation, to processing, to digitizing and placing the materials online—happens in a coordinated and systematic way. We’ve established timelines and workflows and tracking systems to make sure that we know exactly where each document is going and when. But the most important part of the project, and the reason we’ve been able to accomplish so much even during the pandemic is the brilliant, hard-working, and dedicated Vilna team we have in place.”

“ THE SIMPLE ACT OF TOUCHING A PAGE CAN CAUSE IT TO CRUMBLE...

Tatiana Popova, Head of the Preservation Lab, is deeply involved in YIVO’s time-sensitive “rescue” mission. She interacts often with archivists and the digital lab on the same floor and values their input. “We work closely across all departments in order to succeed,” she explains. “Preservation is basically a race against time to keep old documents from disintegrating before they can be digitized and ingested.”

Tatiana came to the U.S. from Russia and has spent 22 years working with YIVO materials. She is adept at treating mold, acid

damage, and other forms of deterioration, assessing which papers can be saved through painstaking repair. Among her challenges is dealing with oversized documents that have eroded. Tatiana says: “I feel like a doctor, and every patient is different to diagnose and treat. The simple act of touching a page can cause it to crumble, which is upsetting because the page reflects people’s lives and ideas. Whether we encapsulate pages in mylar or use another method, we have to protect materials so we can stabilize them and achieve scannable copies.”

“The Vilna treasures bring history to life,” adds Tatiana. “Sometimes, I discover handmade artifacts in boxes or an interesting book in Russian, and it brings me back to another world.”

“ THE VILNA COLLECTIONS SHOW US HOW INTERCONNECTED THE JEWISH COMMUNITY WAS TO THE BROADER COMMUNITY...

Allison Richards, a Conservator, has a background in art and Jewish Studies. She enjoys caring for the many colorful Yiddish theater posters representing productions from all over the world, from Poland to Argentina, Chile, and the U.S. Allison has conserved posters advertising public lectures by Bundist labor leaders and restored age-impacted photographs taken during the 1920s and 30s. All require technical delicacy. Together, they represent an expansive range of human endeavor within Jewish communities across the continents.

“The Vilna Collections show us how interconnected the Jewish community was to the broader community, and the desire of Jewish people to be citizens of the world, participating in global cultural, literary, artistic, and scientific circles.” Allison hopes the Vilna Collections will help to expand current, more narrowly defined perspectives on Jewish Studies.

Yakov Sklar, Head of Archival Processing for the Vilna project, is a native speaker of Russian and Ukrainian. “We have a great team and work very well together, sharing our language and technical abilities,” says Yakov. “We process original texts received from institutions in Vilnius, Lithuania, and documents that have been in YIVO’s possession for 70 years or more. Documents are processed in a logical, systematic manner to develop an efficient finding aid for readers. We start with creating general descriptions, followed by more granular details. Materials need to be cataloged before they reach the digitization labs.” During 2020, Yakov reviewed and cataloged the personal and professional papers of Elias Tcherikower, taking great pleasure in this scholarly task.

“Archival collections are, by their nature, unique. As an archivist, I care about the collection as a whole, with its broad appeal,” Yakov commented. “I enjoy discovering a letter from a famous Russian terrorist before the Revolution or written by Vladimir Nabokov’s father, but to me, the overarching value of

the Vilna Collection is its coverage of every aspect of Jewish life during the Russian empire and the interwar period.”

Devora Geller, Digital Preservation Manager, shepherds archival activities from digitization through ingest, when literature and artifacts are posted online for the benefit of readers and researchers. Each workday brings intriguing new archival discoveries. “I have the best job because I get to see everyone’s special finds, which might be written in German, Yiddish, Russian, Polish, French, Spanish or even Chinese,” she states.

One of Devora’s key roles is to achieve quality assurance for fragile, deteriorating artifacts, often constructed of poor paper stock and stored haphazardly. Entire caches of documents and records were hidden by people to impede Nazi looting in Jewish ghettos. Much was discovered in substantial disrepair after the war. “Quality assurance professionals are problem-solvers. Fortunately, my colleagues are talented people with a collaborative spirit,” says Devora.

She adds: “We are exposed to so many topics, everything from a book on psychoanalysis to Yiddish translations of Henry Ford’s autobiography and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The Vilna Collection shows us what the Yiddish world was reading and its cultural pursuits. We have beautiful posters in the Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum Collection, and musical compositions from the plays, with notations written out by hand.”

“ I FEEL LIKE A DETECTIVE SEARCHING FOR CLUES.

Copious amounts of material are processed to meet significant deadlines. The Vilna project, a massive undertaking, is scheduled for completion year-end 2021, and the team has worked assiduously to reach their goal. Although YIVO’s headquarters in New York closed from March through July due to the pandemic, forcing staff to work remotely, the team digitized 100,000 pages just between July and December. They returned to the partially re-opened building with great anticipation and a clear longing to handle cherished books, letters, compositions, records, and posters.

Maintaining this level of productivity is challenging, particularly given the fragility of documents and their often mysterious provenance. Judi Yuen, a Digital Projects Specialist, compares the physical books to digital images, ensuring that the images are clear and represent the actual text. “Sometimes, I handle pieces of paper that aren’t dated or easily identified, and I need to figure out their context. When was the document created? Who wrote it and for what audience and purpose?” says Judi, who studied Library Science. She gave the example of sequencing pages from a Yiddish newspaper and trying to determine its rightful place in the larger archival framework. “I feel like a detective searching for clues,” she remarks.

During 2019, YIVO established an in-house Digital Lab to



“ EVERYTHING WE TOUCH HAS MEANING THAT GOES WAY BEYOND THE PHYSICAL OBJECT ITSELF.

streamline the digitization and ingest of books and artifacts, enabling public and research access to thousands of high quality artifacts online. Phil Karolak, Digital Lab Technician, was inspired to join the YIVO team when he grasped the Vilna Collections’ magnitude, not to mention the positive emotions displayed by board members, supporters, and staff who embrace their heritage so fully. “I’ve worked on hundreds of digital projects during my career, but this project is unique. I’m proud to be part of it,” said Phil. “We are opening doors to history and bringing new information to light. We are preserving much more than pieces of paper and books. Everything we touch has meaning that goes way beyond the physical object itself.” ■

LEFT:
Di shklaveray, oder di laybeygenshaft (Slavery or Serfdom) a Yiddish adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, translated by Isaac Meir Dik, 1887. The physical copy of this volume is held at and was digitized by our partners at the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania.

ABOVE:
Poster advertising a production of *Khantshe in Amerike*, an operetta with music by Joseph Rumshinsky and libretto by Isidore Lillian, Antwerp, 1930.

**YIVO
RECEIVES
IMLS SAVE
AMERICA'S
TREASURES
GRANT**

YIVO has been awarded a Save America's Treasures Grant of \$119,433 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). This grant will enable YIVO to preserve four music and theater collections that are part of the Project. These collections are important, yet little-known, resources for the study and exploration of not

only modern Jewish culture and American Jewish immigrant culture, but also of American theater and popular culture.

The collections include:

- ▶ **The Esther Rachel Kaminska Yiddish Theater Museum Collection**, which includes manuscripts, playbills, posters, correspondence, clippings, and photographs related to Jewish theater in Poland and other countries before World War II.
- ▶ **Vilna Music Collection**, which contains rare, often handwritten music, including the scores of about 200 operas, operettas, and vaudeville skits written for Yiddish-language plays performed in Europe and the Americas.
- ▶ **The Papers of Abraham Moshe Bernstein**, which contain printed and manuscript musical works of a prominent Russian Jewish cantor, choirmaster, composer of Jewish liturgical and popular music, music teacher, musicologist, and writer who was active in Vilna, Poland from the late 19th century to the 1930s.
- ▶ **The Jewish Music Societies Collection**, which contains correspondence, minutes of meetings, reports, financial records, playbills, posters, and printed materials from several Russian Jewish music societies.

These four collections document Jewish culture in both Europe and America that nourished an important formative period in modern American culture. From its earliest years, Yiddish theater in America intersected with the mainstream English-language stage: with reviews appearing in the English-language press, actors and actresses transitioning to Broadway, and Yiddish plays translated and staged on Broadway to great acclaim.



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PROGRESS THROUGH
DECEMBER 1, 2020

YIVO has raised
\$6 million of our
\$7 million goal

OVER 3 MILLION
pages digitized



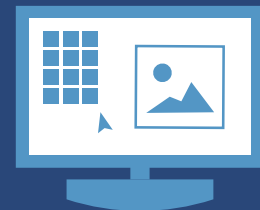
100%

books digitized
50% available online
[Project goal: 12,500 books]



Over 75%

archival documents digitized
[Project goal: Est. 1.5 million pages]



Over 50%

images of books and documents
available online
[Project goal: Est. 4.1 million pages]

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We greatly appreciate and acknowledge the following donors for their generous support of this Project:

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** as of DECEMBER 1, 2020*



ABOUT THE PROJECT

"THESE MATERIALS ARE HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS"

During World War II, the Nazis looted YIVO's archive and library, along with other Jewish libraries in Vilnius, Lithuania. The Jews who were forced to sort the materials for the Nazis risked their lives to smuggle these rare treasures to hiding places in the Vilna Ghetto. Much was destroyed, but some of the materials were returned to YIVO (who had by then relocated to the United States), with the help of the U.S. Army. Other items remained in Vilnius to be recovered and rescued from the Soviets by a Lithuanian librarian, who hid them for over 40 years until they were rediscovered in 1988. In 2017, approximately 200,000 additional documents were discovered in Lithuania, including rare and unpublished works.

The Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections project, launched in 2015, is a \$7 million, international landmark digital initiative to process, conserve, and digitally reunite YIVO's divided prewar library and archival collections through a dedicated web portal. These materials include newly-discovered Holocaust documentation and the remnants of the famed Strashun Library.

This project is a partnership between the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the Lithuanian Central State Archives, the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania, and the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences.

It has inspired funders, scholars, and laypeople around the world.



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The Edward Blank

YIVO Vilna Online Collections

NEWSLETTER
WINTER 2021

ABOUT YIVO

The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research is dedicated to the preservation and study of the history and culture of East European Jewry worldwide. For nearly a century, YIVO has pioneered new forms of Jewish scholarship, research, education, and cultural expression. Our public programs and exhibitions, as well as online and on-site courses, extend our global outreach and enable us to share our vast resources. The YIVO Archives contains more than 23 million original items and YIVO's Library has over 400,000 volumes—the single largest resource for such study in the world.

Currently, YIVO is not open to the public. We continue to closely monitor the situation and following the guidance from the offices of the Governor and the Mayor. The health and safety of our patrons and staff is our primary concern. YIVO is located at the Center for Jewish History, and we will be working with their team on reopening plans. In the meantime, YIVO staff continue to work remotely and can be contacted via email.

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Fri 9:00am–4:00pm

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