

YIVO AT 100:

PRESERVING ASHKENAZI CULTURE OF THE PAST FOR THE PRESENT AND FUTURE

By Beryl Lieff Benderly

The names people give their children can say a lot about their values and identities. So when, between the two world wars, in Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania), a Jewish teacher, journalist and activist named Aron Mark and his wife, Fania, gave their first-born son the unusual name of Yivo, everyone could see that they strongly favored strengthening the Yiddish language and the secular, modern, Yiddish-based Jewish culture then flourishing in Eastern and Central Europe.

That's because YIVO is the acronym (in both Yiddish and English) of the Yiddisher Visenshaftlecher Institut (Jewish Scientific Institute), then a relatively new organization committed to studying and strengthening the Ashkenazi Jewish culture of Eastern Europe and its thousand-year-old native speech. At the time, European Jews were struggling to figure out their place in a rapidly changing world. Was the right linguistic choice for the Jewish future Yiddish, modern Hebrew (to serve a growing Jewish presence in what was then British Mandatory Palestine), or the languages of the Gentiles



Photo: Ajay Suresh/Wikimedia Commons

Located in the headquarters of the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research maintains galleries and research facilities that are open to the public.

they lived among? YIVO, which came down strongly on the side of a modernized “mamaloshen,” had strong appeal for Yiddish supporters like Aron Mark.

Tragically, though, Yivele, as his parents called him, and many of his relatives and neighbors, were among the tens of thousands murdered at the Ponary forest killing site that the Nazis used between 1941 and 1943, as historian Katherine Lebow notes. Yiddish, with 11 million pre-World War II speakers, was then world Jewry’s most prevalent language. Today, it is essentially gone from daily use except among ultra-Orthodox Jews. But Yivele’s eponym lives on, and, headquartered in Manhattan, constitutes what journalist Alyssa Quint calls “the brick-and-mortar memory of East European Jewry.” This year, the organization that the Marks so ardently supported celebrates its centennial.

The physical memory consists of YIVO’s 24 million documents and artifacts, which comprise the most extensive collection of materials related to Jewish Eastern Europe on earth. YIVO is one of five partner organizations that share the Center for Jewish History on West 16th Street. The door between the Ionic columns on the building’s brick Palladian façade leads



Courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Visitors at the Center for Jewish History can contextualize YIVO's collections of art and artifacts through special themed exhibits. "Missing Husbands" focused on a column of the same name published for many years in the Forverts (the Jewish Daily Forward) newspaper, illustrated with photos of men who had deserted their families.



Courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Visitors snap photos during a behind-the-scenes tour of YIVO's archives.

to modern facilities including a two-story great hall; storage and conservation areas for the priceless collections; a bright, book-lined two-story reading room; multiple gallery spaces for public exhibitions; and an auditorium seating over 200.

Since World War II, YIVO has actively increased its holdings while continuing to advance knowledge by publishing pivotal journals and books, both scholarly and popular. Beyond that, a widely used system of standard spelling devised by YIVO scholars has dramatically increased consistency and clarity of written Yiddish, a language long composed of multiple dialects. And though YIVO remains "[d]edicated to the preservation and study of the history and culture of East European Jewry worldwide," according to its Facebook page, it also uses 21st century technology to bring that linguistic and cultural heritage to new, overwhelmingly non-Yiddish-speaking generations around the globe.

"YIVO was founded in 1925 with the support of prominent intellectuals and scholars, including Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, in Berlin, Germany, and Vilna, Poland—today's Vilnius, Lithuania," noted New York Mayor Eric Adams in a proclamation marking March 24, 2025, as "YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Day." Relocating its supposedly temporary wartime headquarters from Vilna to New York, Adams added, YIVO continued telling "the story of the Jewish people: what

they have cherished and endured, and how they have persevered.”

Though a New York branch existed in the organization’s early days, Vilna, for centuries a revered center of Jewish learning, was where the founders did their “scientific,” i.e., systematic and modern, research into the life, culture and language of prewar East Europe’s Jews. Helping a small cadre of pioneering scholars examine sociology, demography, economics, linguistics, and cultural and religious life were thousands of volunteer zamlers (collectors) in shtetls and cities across the region and beyond. They sent in all kinds of then-contemporary data, documents, artifacts, folklore and linguistic information, sometimes along with (usually) small donations.

YIVO under attack

In September 1939, Poland suffered the twin calamities of both German and Soviet invasions. Vilna first came under Soviet occupation and YIVO became part of its institute for Lithuanian studies. Seizing control in 1941, Germany began looting YIVO’s collections, forcing Jewish intellectuals to work at extracting valuable and noteworthy items for a planned “Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question” in Frankfurt, with the remainder slated for destruction. Vilna’s Jews were meanwhile confined to a ghetto that the Germans largely liquidated by late 1943 by starvation and disease, at the Ponary Forest, or by transport to death camps. Instead of following orders to plunder YIVO’s collections, however, courageous Jewish workers calling themselves the Paper Brigade risked their lives to hide or bury books and papers in the ghetto.

When the war began, YIVO’s director, the eminent linguist Max Weinreich—whose Vilna apartment served as the organization’s first headquarters—happened to find himself, along with his son Uriel, himself a future prominent Yiddish linguist, at a linguistics conference in Denmark. Reaching New York with Uriel, Max arranged the supposedly temporary wartime headquarters in 1940. Restoring the Vilna center after the war proved impossible, leaving New York as YIVO’s main location. In the immediate postwar years, YIVO succeeded in retrieving many hidden documents and, with the help of the U.S. Army, some of the materials the Nazis took to Germany. YIVO also made a concerted effort to document the Holocaust with original materials, some of which served as evidence at the

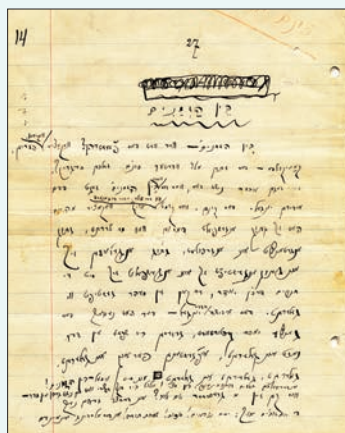
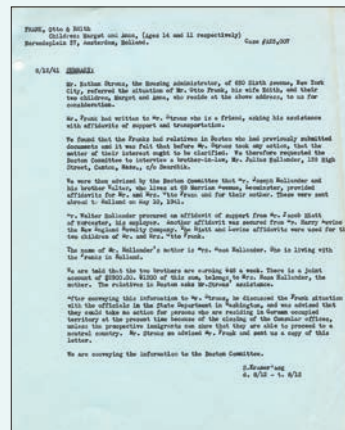
ARTIFACTS FROM THE BOOK AND EXHIBITION “100 OBJECTS FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF THE YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH”

All photos: Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research



Banner of the Hebrew Actors Union. Organized in 1900, this group became the world’s first official union of performing artists, as noted by YIVO’s curators. An artifact of the Yiddish theater, the banner also evidences the key role played by Jewish men and women in advancing the reforms of the labor movement, which revolutionized the rights of working people and mandated improved working conditions in the United States.

A page of notes dated August 1941, from Otto Frank’s National Refugee Service Case application files. This document reveals the tragic fate of Otto Frank and his family, which included his daughter, Anne, all of whom could have immigrated to the United States. The papers poignantly represent the files of countless others who had obtained sponsorship qualifying them to apply for refugee status but who nonetheless were refused.



Manuscript page from “Funem Yarid” (Back from the Fair) by Sholem Aleichem, 1915. Publishing under the pen name Sholem Aleichem, Russian-born Shalom Rabinovitz (1859-1916) is recognized as one of the world’s greatest, and most beloved, writers, in Yiddish or any other language. Marking changes to “Funem Yarid,” Sholem Aleichem edited his unfinished memoir to conform to the fictionalized version of shtetl life with which his works are identified. His Tevye stories became the basis for the musical “Fiddler on the Roof.”

Nuremberg war crimes trials. But, with the Soviets' tightening grip on Eastern Europe and crackdown on Jewish culture in the late 1940s, heroic Paper Brigade members who had survived and returned to Vilna had to flee.

Although only a portion of YIVO's original wealth of documents, books, newspapers, diaries and more remains, it forms the foundation of YIVO's New York collections. Besides continuing to gather materials, YIVO also continued its scholarly work and publication, producing books and journals and organizing conferences. It also offered Yiddish language courses and an expanding array of classes and cultural and educational events that attracted a growing non-scholarly audience.

The numbers of those studying, researching and learning from and about YIVO's treasures have drastically expanded in recent years. When its holdings were only on paper, says CEO and Executive Director Jonathan Brent, "about five to seven thousand people annually would come to the YIVO building in New York." But then it began digitizing materials and putting the Vilna collections online, which brought in over 750,000 digital visitors from around the world.

The COVID-19 lockdown forced online the Yiddish language courses formerly offered only in person in Manhattan, revealing a large international population eager to learn to speak and read over Zoom. Now, dozens of virtual Yiddish classes engage learners ranging from college students to octogenarians who are located in North America, Europe, Latin America and beyond. YIVO study tours also take travelers from around the world to the sites of European Jewish history. (Full disclosure: I traveled to both Lithuania and Poland and study Yiddish online with YIVO.)

These people—many of them new to Yiddish—form part of a larger renaissance of interest in the language and its culture, as many Jews—and some non-Jews—seek greater knowledge and understanding of the world their grandparents and great-grandparents inhabited. Interest extends well beyond Jewish descendants of immigrants from Eastern Europe. Just as origins in Poland, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine are central to the identity of countless Ashkenazi Jews, so, Brent says, has the millennium-long Jewish presence been gaining awareness in those countries since the Soviets stopped trying to erase it.

Building relationships

Strengthening these shared and mutually enriching connections is an important goal. In 2023, Brent and YIVO Chief of Staff Shelly Freeman traveled to Kyiv concerning "a major initiative underway in Ukraine"—despite the war—to ensure that an important archive that survived both a world war and the Soviets is "protected from Russian aggression," Brent notes. Collaborations also extend to Poland and to a partnership with Lithuania, where Vilnius is now the national capital. On June 20, 2019, during a YIVO study tour, my husband and

I witnessed the dedication of a plaque at the site of YIVO's long-destroyed building in Vilna. Dignitaries present included Lithuania's ministers of culture and foreign affairs and Vilnius's mayor. "YIVO's merits and contribution to studying and preserving the Jewish heritage and the heritage of our multinational society are invaluable," noted Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius.

Two weeks later, on July 6, after we tourists returned home, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė bestowed on Brent a high national honor, the Cross of the Knight of the Order for Merits to Lithuania, for his work building cooperation among institutions in preserving the historic record of Lithuanian Jewry and, specifically, the partnership among YIVO, the Lithuanian Central State Archives and two major national libraries in digitizing vast holdings in New York and Vilnius, and making them available in a dedicated internet portal through the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections project.

Lithuania "puts the preservation of Jewish heritage high among its priorities, and appreciates the work that YIVO has been doing," declared the National Library of Lithuania on Facebook. Further emphasizing their cooperation in cultural preservation, in 2023, YIVO and the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania jointly established an award "for Contributions to the Development of Relations and Understanding between Lithuania and the Jews," naming it for Antanas Ulpis, a non-Jewish library chief who, in 1948, risked his life to supervise the rescue of thousands of Jewish documents and books destined for Soviet destruction by hiding them in a cavernous, disused Catholic church.

Then, as YIVO's centennial year approached, the Embassy of Lithuania in Washington, D.C., held its own celebration on Dec. 9, 2024. Featured speakers included Brent, who outlined YIVO's history, and Ambassador Audra Plepyte, who saluted "the history of YIVO and the bravery of the people who heroically preserved the documents keeping so many stories of the past alive." Thanks to them, "the rich history of Litvaks survived to this day" and forms "an enormous part of our history and common heritage."

YIVO's own anniversary celebration has included conferences in New York and Vilnius, a book on YIVO's history slated for publication in 2026 and an exhibit featuring 100 significant objects from YIVO's collections. Other initiatives underway include "the first learning and media center devoted to the Eastern European Jewish history in the world," and plans for "what we hope to be the first master's degree program in Yiddish language and civilization," Brent says.

Aron and Yivele Mark would likely not recognize the transformed world that YIVO functions in today. But the enduring goals of learning, teaching and preserving Yiddish culture and language would be familiar indeed. 