

THE VILNA PROJECT

DIGITIZING THE JEWISH TREASURES
OF THE YIVO COLLECTION



Thousands of chasidim of the Gerrer Rebbe gather in Bendin for his son's wedding to the daughter of the Rebbe's brother-in-law, 1923.

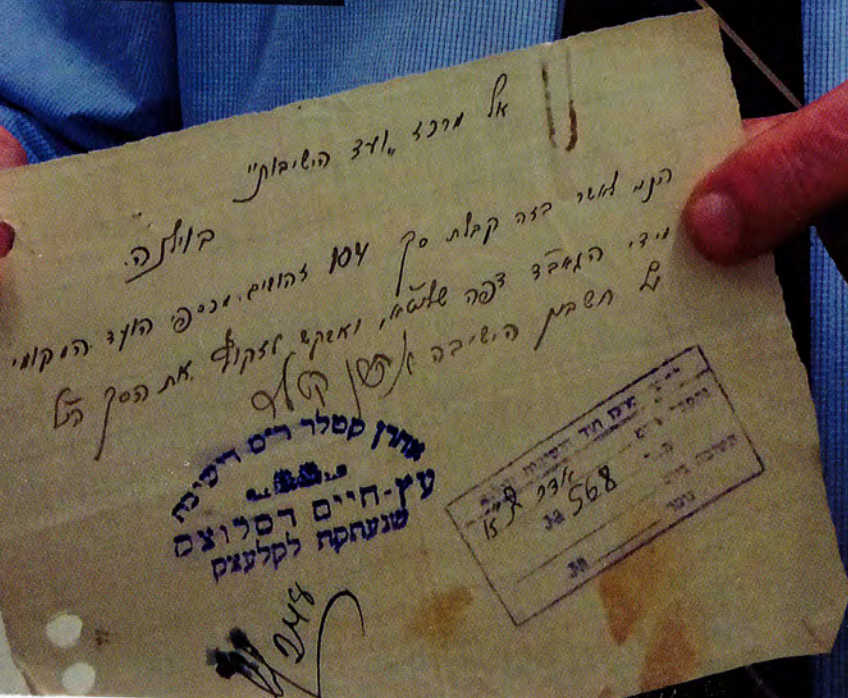
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BY ROIZY WALDMAN

I magine this:

You enter a room. In the room is a table. On the table lies a *sefer*. You walk toward that table, angle your body forward, and take a look. The *sefer* is handwritten, its letters as meticulously formed as pearls. You look for the name of the author and cannot believe your eyes. The *sefer* you're looking at is an original edition of the *Beis Aharon*—handwritten by none other than the author himself, the saintly Rav Aharon of Karlin.

Perhaps even more amazing than the *sefer* itself, it turns out, is the story behind its survival.



Rabbi Shmuel Klein, project archivist at the YIVO Archives, holding a receipt for funds received by the Kletzk Yeshiva, signed by Rav Aharon Kotler. Photo courtesy YIVO Archives. Reproduction prohibited.

A recent interview I had with the staff of the YIVO Vilna Project began exactly that way: a room, a table, this *sefer* in the center. There were many more documents on the table, yellowed papers browning at the edges, each one more extraordinary than the next:

A handwritten note by Rav Aharon Kotler.

A handwritten note by Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski.

An original pinkas book from Vilna, with the handwritten signature of the Vilna Gaon's son on the first page!

As I lifted each piece, skimmed or read as many as I could, it felt incredible to me that I was seeing these artifacts of our history, actually holding them in my hands. Just imagine, I thought, if these documents could be seen and read by everyone who wishes to do so.

And that, in a sentence, is what the YIVO Vilna Project will accomplish.

The YIVO Vilna Project is a seven-year program that will transcribe, review, describe, photograph, scan, and digitize all the prewar library and archival collections that are housed in New York City and in Vilnius, Lithuania. The project will also reconstruct and digitize the historic, celebrated Strashun Library, one of the most renowned prewar libraries in Europe. Once completed, these digitized documents will be available for everyone to view on a free-access website.

When I recently met at YIVO's Manhattan headquarters with a number of the staff members who have worked on their Vilna Project, including executive director Dr. Jonathan Brent, director of digital initiatives Roberta Newman, senior archivist Fruma Mohrer, project archivist Rabbi Shmuel Klein, and processing archivist Sarah Ponichtera, the sheer amount of work involved in this endeavor became evident.

The project, unprecedented and revolutionary, is more extensive in scope than anything ever attempted in the Jewish research field before. Making real what has for so long been a dream, the Vilna Project and how it came to be is a story of perseverance, daring and courage. It is a story of heroic people risking their lives during a most challenging time of our Jewish history, in order to preserve that history.

AGAINST ALL ODDS, THE SURVIVAL OF THE COLLECTIONS

The materials set to be digitized as part of the Vilna Project include about 10,000 rare or unique books and periodicals and 1.5 million documents collected from the Jewish world of Eastern Europe. That so many documents and artifacts have remained extant is remarkable, considering the trying Jewish history in the

last century. With both Hitler and Stalin intent on obliterating all traces of Jewry and religion, the survival of these precious slices of narrative is nothing short of miraculous.

How, one wonders, have so many relics survived?

The story of these collections officially begins in 1925, when the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research was founded in what was then Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania). The Institute was established with the objective of creating a center for studying Jewish life, both secular and religious. To that end, they began collecting and preserving books, periodicals, posters, photo-



Left: Advertisement for Yomim Noraim services in the courtyard of the shipping office at 2 Leszno Street, Warsaw. "Big, bright rooms with electric lighting. A good, well-known cantor will lead the prayers."

Right: Advertisement for an appearance by Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt in the Great Synagogue (Shtet-shul), Vilna.

YIVO Archives. Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York. Reproduction prohibited.

graphs, art, sheet music (including many melodies sung in various Rebbes' courts), notes handwritten by *gedolim*, statutes and bylaws of Jewish organizations, records of *yeshiva* students, records of political societies, and more—dating as far back as the 17th century.

Vilna was the perfect hub for these collections. Jews had begun settling in Vilna in the 1500s, and the Jewish community had grown to encompass about a third of Europe's Jewish population before World War II. The city boasted scores of *talmidei chachamim* and scholars, and was often referred to as the "Jerusalem of the North."

But then came Hitler. And the vibrant Jewish life in Vilna was truncated, its centuries-old existence—its scholars, students, writers, merchants, housewives, elderly and children—cut right in the heart. Between 1941 and 1944, more than 90 percent of Lithuanian Jews were murdered by the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators. Jewish Vilna was no more.

But what about the documents?

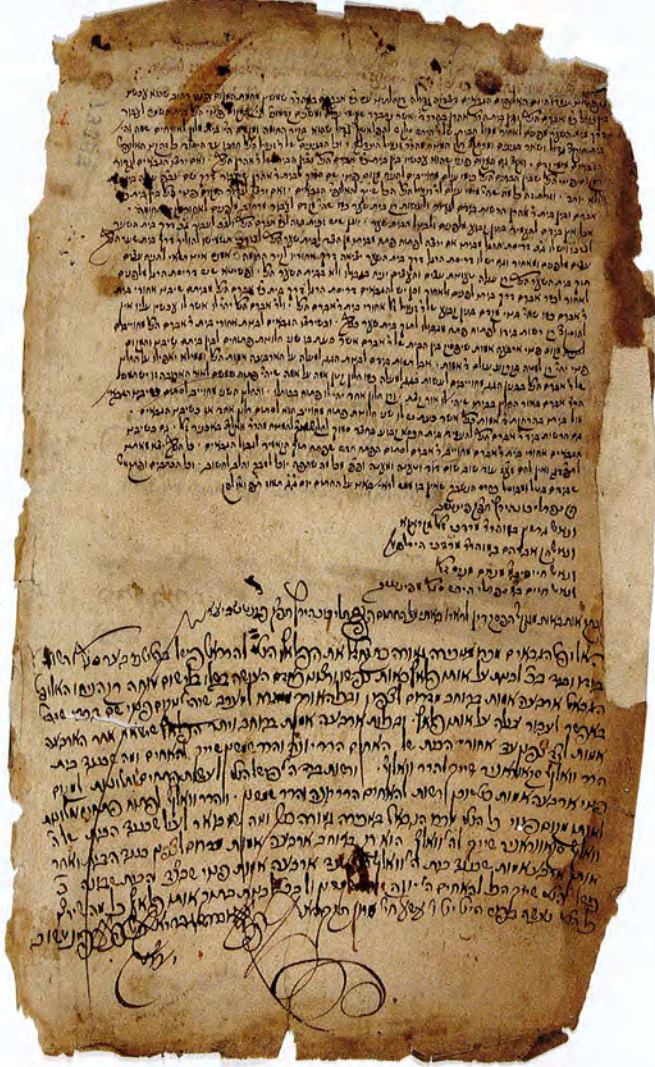
When the Nazis entered Vilna, they turned the YIVO headquarters into their own headquarters for the collection of Jewish artifacts. Because Hitler believed that not a trace of Jewry would remain, he planned to eventually create an *Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question* in Frankfurt, a sort of museum and research center geared toward studying the extinct race of the Jews.

With this in mind, the Nazis selected about 40 Jewish men and

Below: A page from the pinkas (record book) of Pinczow, 1632-1740, which consists mostly of decisions of the local beis din and records of real estate transactions and loans.

Right: A handwritten proclamation by the rabbonim of Vilna in the aftermath of World War I that due to the great scarcity and expense of wine, it was permitted to celebrate the Passover with "sweet tea" instead of the required four cups of wine.

YIVO Archives. Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York. Reproduction prohibited.



KACZERGINSKI RETURNED TO VILNA AFTER THE WAR AND QUICKLY ATTEMPTED TO LOCATE THE TREASURES HE'D RISKED HIS LIFE TO SAVE.

it "insignificant"?
 The Vilna ghetto, where the Jews were sequestered, abutted the YIVO building. Sutzkever, Kaczerginski and the other brave souls with whom they were working decided to smuggle as many artifacts as they could into the ghetto, so that these pieces could be hidden and preserved. In a brave gesture of defiance, the 40 or so forced laborers, called the *Papir-Brigade* (Paper Brigade), risked their lives to smuggle documents and even weapons into the ghetto, under the Nazis' noses. They also entrusted some materials to non-Jewish acquaintances, who agreed—also, at the risk to their lives—to hide these cultural treasures.
 In September 1943, just before the Vilna ghetto was liquidated, Kaczerginski, Sutzkever, his wife Freydko and a few others managed to escape. They joined a partisan unit with whom they fought until the German defeat in July 1944.
 Kaczerginski returned to Vilna after the war and quickly attempted to locate the treasures he'd risked his life to save. He and Sutzkever became involved in the creation of a Jewish museum in Vilna, where they hoped to store and exhibit the rescued relics of a now newly-weighted history.

commanded them to go through the Jewish cultural treasures housed at YIVO and other locations. The order was for them to sift through and choose a limited number—only the most significant pieces—to send to Germany. All other works would be destroyed.
 Among the 40 forced laborers were Yiddish writers Avrom Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski. They and the others faced an impossible task. How does one decide which *gadol's* or scholar's or artist's work to save and which to destroy? What does one do with those precious fragments, the tatters of a *sefer* written by hand hundreds of years ago, lovingly preserved and passed from one generation to the next? Who would have the heart to deem

However, this would not happen as easily as they'd hoped. As before, this historical cache, the treasures that had so courageously been smuggled out of the Nazis' hands, faced a challenge—this time from the Soviets.

Vilnius had been taken from the Germans by the Soviet Army, and Stalin was determined to destroy anything with a whiff of nationalism. Of course, this included anything related to Jewish communities. Why, he wanted to know, did the Jews need a separate museum? Weren't they Soviet citizens? Didn't they consider themselves Soviets above all else?

Some of the Jewish communists in Lithuania believed that the Soviet regime would come around. "Let's just be patient," they encouraged the others, "and we'll get what we want." But Sutzkever, who'd become the director of the fledgling Jewish museum, believed otherwise. In Soviet Vilnius, he knew, these treasures were no longer safe. Secretly, he made his way to Moscow, and with the assistance of a foreign correspondent, smuggled some of the rescued materials to New York City, where YIVO now had a growing base.

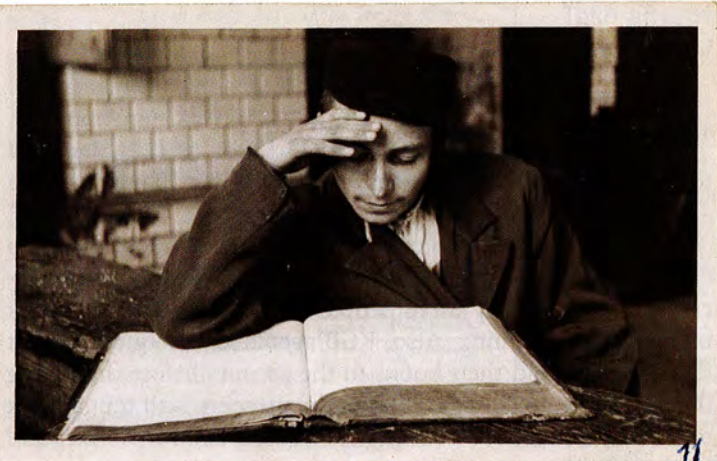
Kaczerginski remained optimistic for a while longer. He had been an ardent communist sympathizer before the war and so had more trust in the Soviet administration than Sutzkever did. In 1945, he took over as director of the museum and traveled to Moscow to explain to the Soviet authorities that officials in Lithuania were giving the museum and other Jewish institutions a hard time.

In the offices of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Soviet administrators, looking kind and patient, listened to him understandingly. Kaczerginski was relieved. He returned to Vilna in a hopeful mood, certain that Vilna's Jewish Museum would soon proudly display the rescued treasures.

As soon as he got off the train in Vilna, he was informed that the Trash Administration had removed 30 tons of YIVO materials and were getting ready to ship them to a paper mill for scrap. His heart dropped.

Frantically, he rushed to the shipping depot. Piles and piles of

Portrait of a student at study in the yeshivah in Mezritch, 1930s.
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Later, Kacerginski wrote about these times. "We had a bizarre realization," he recalled. "We realized we must save our treasures *again*, get them out of here, or they would perish. At best, they would survive, but they would never see the light of day in the Jewish world."

Gradually, all the museum activists chose to emigrate and smuggle out as many of the materials as they could. This was as dangerous an undertaking as smuggling into the Vilna ghetto had been during the Nazi reign.

In 1945, Kacerginski submitted his resignation as museum director, and by July 1946, he and Sutzkever arrived in Poland with many of the museum's materials hidden in their suitcases. From Poland, and later from Paris, they shipped the materials to YIVO in New York City. These materials eventually became the "Sutzkever-Kacerginski Collection," containing numerous notable documents, including many from the ghetto and Holocaust period.

But these were not the only materials salvaged. For one thing, there was the material saved by the Nazis for their intended museum. Altogether, 420 crates of material were deemed significant enough to be shipped to Germany. These, the Nazis had concluded, would form the core of their future museum. But Hashem willed otherwise. After the war, the 420 crates were discovered by the US Army. In 1947, under the Army's protection, the archival collection was brought to America and returned to YIVO headquarters, now at its new location in New York City.

But hundreds of thousands of papers had remained behind in Vilnius. Sutzkever and Kacerginski, though they'd brought as much as they could, resigned themselves—albeit bitterly and sadly—to the fact that these papers would be lost forever.

Indeed, in 1948, the Soviets picked up all the remaining materials from the Jewish museum and dumped them in the basement of what had once been a church and became, under the Soviets, a Book Chamber. Although most books brought there

were kept in pristine condition, the Jewish Museum's materials were dumped into the dark, unused basement.

Dr. Antanas Ulpis, the Book Chamber's director, was ordered to destroy the Jewish books, but he defied Stalin's orders and kept them hidden in the basement. After Stalin's death, Dr. Ulpis arranged to have many of the Jewish books in his repository catalogued, but he was still afraid to tell anyone about the bundles of material he'd hidden. For more than 40 years, the bundles remained where they were. Only after Dr. Ulpis retired did he dare reveal his secret.

In 1988, once Mikhail Gorbachev instituted reforms and freedoms in the Soviet Union and these treasures were no longer at risk, the bundles were taken out of their hiding place and transferred to the Lithuanian Central State Archives. In 1993, more



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Left: Portrait of two children, an uncle and his nephew, playing chess outdoors in Lodz, Poland, 1919.

Right: A flyer advertising the sale of chometz by Rabbi Eliezer Tzuckerberg before the start of Pesach, Lodz. The flyer notes that those wishing to sell chometz should show up on time and with a list of all chometz items they will be selling.

YIVO Archives. Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York. Reproduction prohibited.

treasures were surprisingly discovered during a cleanup of the basement, and these were sent to YIVO in New York City.

Nearly thirty years have passed since the salvaged treasures were recovered. Yet, the public eye has not been able to benefit from and enjoy these riches. Part of the problem was funds. With so many needy and worthwhile causes, it was hard to secure the necessary sum required for the cataloguing of these documents. Another problem was location. It seemed clear that all of these antiquities should be stored at a single location, to enable access for everyone.

But where? Vilnius wanted it. With its long, vibrant Jewish history, the place where it all began, it certainly had a claim to the collection. New York, where so many Jews currently reside—possibly the successor of the title “Jerusalem of the North”—also warranted consideration. Which space would be the most appropriate place for it all to come together?

And so, without funds and without a decision made on the location quandary, the materials remained where they were.

Until...enter the World Wide Web. Dr. Brent, YIVO's executive director, had an idea: if these valuable artifacts of our past could be photographed, digitized, and placed on the Web, everyone, everywhere, would be able to read and see them.

Now, all that was needed was funds. The cost of locating, cataloguing and digitizing the archival collections in Vilna and New York, as well as the contents of the historic pre-war Strashun Library, is estimated at a hefty \$5.25 million. By any reckoning, this is a lot of money. Still, the goal was too important, too worthwhile, to give up. As the YIVO Vilna Project's brochure

asserts, “Without this project, many of these unique, original materials—and perhaps more importantly, the knowledge they represent—will be lost to history.”

And so, funds were raised. The YIVO Vilna Project has succeeded in garnering support from The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, the Good Will Foundation, the Kronhill Pletka Foundation, and the Ruth and David Levine Charitable Fund. With these major funders in place, the work was ready to begin.

THE SCOPE OF THE TREASURES

What can you expect to see once The Vilna Project completes its seven-year mission? The archival collections include *sefarim* (some extremely rare ones), literary works, letters (many from and to *gedolim*), memoirs, street posters, photographs, pamphlets, newspapers, religious treatises, communal records and more. These objects chronicle about 500 years of Jewish life in Poland, Russia, Lithuania and other European countries.

SOME HIGHLIGHTS:

- As mentioned above, the New York collection holds **the pinkas book of the Vilna Gaon's shul**. A *pinkas* book is a record book of a particular community's people, their statutes and their way of living. It served as an administrative document, and now—because most of these communities were wiped out—are memorials to the lives of entire communities. The *pinkas* of the Vilna Gaon's *shul* has the inscription and signature of the Vilna

Gaon's son, Rav Avraham, on the front page.

● **A telegram, written in Polish by Rav Aharon Kotler.** "Send us *gemaras*," Reb Aharon implores American Jews, to whom the telegram was addressed. "We need *gemaras*!" And below it, he adds, "And also, please send money."

● **Documents of pre-war community charities and organizations.** These include original documents of soup kitchens, day cares, orphanages, Talmud Torahs, schools—all those aid societies that quietly ensure that no one is left without his or her basic needs. What extraordinary witnesses these pieces of paper are, offering a glimpse of the ebb and flow of daily pre-war life!

● **Posters and notes that hung in the *beis midrash* or other communal structures in Jewish neighborhoods.** Skimming the documents that the Vilna Project staff had kindly prepared for me, I found a poster from "Harabonim DeKehillaseinu," apparently sent out to various *shtetlech* and cities in order to clarify *halachah*. "We ask," the note proclaims in Yiddish, "that the baker who keeps the town's cholent should be extremely careful to place the cholent on the gas before the *shkiah*. Otherwise, it is as if the cholent was cooked on Shabbos, which makes it *asur* to eat!" Another note, beautifully handwritten, also in Yiddish, was already frayed and torn at the edges. Its contents were as sad as its appearance. The note was addressed to the *kehillah* and read as follows: "Because of the terrible economic times we are living through now, the *rabbanim* have found it necessary to inform you that poor people who cannot afford to buy wine for the *arba kosos* can be *yotzei*, according to *halachah*, with warm tea." Another on a similar topic addressed the issue of expensive kosher meat. "We must lower the prices," the poster declared.

● **An original document of the Sarah Schenirer Bais Yaakov bylaws.**

● **Administrative documents from *yeshivos*, among them Eitz Chayim, Kletzk, and others.** These documents include records of all the people who donated money to the *yeshivah*, complete with dates and amounts. Even more moving—in light of what was to come—are the records of the *yeshivah* students themselves. Sadly, many of these students were murdered along with their entire families by the Nazis. These records—the boys' names on these yellowing sheets of paper—are in some cases the only piece of evidence that they ever existed.

● **Sheet music for original melodies, along with handwritten annotations.** The people who'd sent YIVO these sheets often added comments in the margins, explaining in Yiddish where they first heard the song and how it should be sung. "I heard this song 'Yom Zeh Mechubad' from a *chasid* in the Aleksander Rebbe's court," one person wrote. Another advised, "This should be sung *langsam ober nisht shlepened*—slowly, but not dragged out." And yet another: "To be sung with a *chasidische bren*—*chasidish* fervor!"

These documents are a mere dribble of the extensive wealth of history these collections contain. How amazing it is that in just seven years, with Hashem's help, this extraordinary trove will be ours to feast on with a mere click and a few keystrokes!

MYSTERY IN THE MAKING: THE UNOPENED BANKER BOXES IN VILNA

The recent emergence of the now famous "Chofetz Chaim video" caused a dramatic sensation among *chareidi* Jewry. What privilege! To see the saintly Chofetz Chaim in action: his face, his walk, his demeanor! It was a truly heartwarming find.

Is it possible that there are more such finds awaiting us?

During the 1990s, some of the materials retrieved in Vilnius were shipped to New York for cataloguing. These documents, ragged and in delicate condition, were cleaned and repaired, photographed and catalogued. Then, having been restored to their best possible state by the staff in New York, they were sent back to Vilnius.

Indeed, as expected, the material was rife with history: hundreds of rich, unique documents that can help perpetuate knowledge and understanding of the world of East European Jewry. All of this material will soon be part of the Vilna Project.

But there's more. At this time, there are at least 30 banker boxes, crammed with material, that have not yet been opened. Still in their original boxes, they sit there, waiting for us to uncover them.

Who knows whether the next Chofetz Chaim video is in there? Who knows how many hundreds of objects, touched by—perhaps written by—great *tzaddikim* of yore, lie crumpled and squeezed into an anonymous brown banker box in Vilnius?

The Vilna Project: a landmark project in Jewish history that will unlock the doors of a once vibrant Jewish world in Europe. Indeed, history remains to be made. ●



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