

YIVO: The Geography of Freedom

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In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has been said that "Europe is not a geography—it's a set of values and principles," through which the “breath of freedom” can be felt. What are those values and principles? What is that breath of freedom? And what has this to do with YIVO and YIVO's history?

Born in Kaunas in 1906, Emmanuel Levinas lived most of his life in France and was one of the twentieth century's foremost philosophers of humanism. He was not to my knowledge ever directly affiliated with YIVO, but he could have been. In his 1956 essay, *For a Jewish Humanism*, he wrote that **“Judaism is no longer either a religion or a separate nation,” but was “to be found at the crossroads of faith and logic” and preserved a vision of “... man's human essence,”** by which he meant the construction of what we consider to be human in us all, the precious and insecure inheritance of a many millennia of civilization and culture.

What do these lofty, abstract words have to do with us here today or with the founding of YIVO and its many activities, its fate at the hands of the Nazis in 1941-43, the Soviets in 1947-9, the saving of its archive and library during WW II or its ultimate rescue, in 1949, by the Lithuanian man, Antanas Ulpis, the Head of the Lithuanian National Book Chamber?

The YIVO Institute founded here in Vilna/Vilnius in 1925, with centers in Berlin and Warsaw, furthered this “breath of freedom” in its effort to tell the whole story of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, a story of both faith and logic. To do so, YIVO collected materials from every walk of life, every political, social, religious affiliation from the Bund to the Chassidism, from the St. Petersburg School of art music to the folksongs of the Pale, from the powerful to the weak, from the momentous to the ephemeral. Materials came to YIVO from all over the globe and in all European, and several, non-European languages. Abraham Lincoln, Leo Tolstoy, King Zog of Albania, Georgii Plekhanov, Emma Goldman, the American philosopher John Dewey, Theodore Dreiser, Henry Ford, Pope Paul VI, Queen Elizabeth II of England, the Vilna Chief of Police, as well as Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Marc Chagall, Sholem Aleichem, Dovid Bergelson, Chaim Grade, a box of pre-Revolutionary Cossack cigarettes, posters advertising new techniques in health care, an agreement involving the Vilna water carrier’s union, and rare rabbinical manuscripts of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century—all this and more are represented in YIVO’s vast holdings of some 24 million documents and 400,000 books. YIVO collected everything that touched the Jewish world of Eastern Europe and Russia and everything that world touched. It possessed what Arcadius Kahan once called “YIVO’s glorious indifference.” Today, YIVO’s collections span the world; our programs and classes are viewed online in 150 countries around the globe.

Not long before YIVO was founded, however, Adolf Hitler announced an effort that coincided with but was diametrically opposed to YIVO’s—a kind of anti-YIVO. In 1919, Hitler wrote to a German army officer that “Antisemitism as a political movement may not and cannot be determined by flashes of emotion, but rather through the understanding of **facts.**” In other words,

it must be researched, studied, taught—thereby creating an “Antisemitism of Reason.” This impulse gave rise to Alfred Rosenberg’s Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question in Frankfurt and to the cruel efforts of the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* task force that collected Jewish artifacts, documents, books throughout Europe for study and eventual use in Nazi antisemitic propaganda. The so-called facts, reason, logic shorn of completeness, utilized to propel the narrow, one-sided, nationalistic fury of Nazi Germany became the deadliest weapon in Hitler’s arsenal against the Jewish people and ultimately the “human essence.” Here “facts” no longer included truth, and so-called truth was the servant of only one purpose.

In 1941, when this weapon was turned upon YIVO and the Jewish community of Vilna, Jewish slave workers, among whom were the poets Avrom Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski, were recruited from the Vilna Ghetto and forced to sort books and manuscripts including all of YIVO’s archive and library for materials to be sent to the Frankfurt Institute. These books and documents to be used to incriminate the Jews of Eastern Europe included the autobiographies of teenagers, mathematics and science notebooks of Vilna grade school pupils, scripts of the Yiddish theater, manuscripts and letters of Sholem Aleichem, the medical records of Tsemach Szabad. Sutzkever, Kaczerginski and others, including Zelig Kalmanovich, formed the so-called “Paper Brigade” that heroically hid numerous works from confiscation by the Nazis in the Vilna Ghetto, the full story of which is recounted in David Fishman’s excellent book, *The Book Smugglers*. They rescued these works from the Nazis at a time when many in the Ghetto had to burn paper to keep warm, and many could not understand their reasons for doing so. But the Paper Brigade recognized that what they were rescuing was far greater than any individual.

Without these documents and books, all record of their culture would be lost and with that loss a significant part of that “human essence” Levinas has spoken of.

The brutal postwar occupation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union brought with it in 1948 Stalin’s anti-Jewish, anti-cosmopolitan campaign, and those books, artworks and documents saved by the Paper Brigade from the Nazis were now again under threat of immediate destruction. What happened in those dark days of 1948-49 is a story that still remains to be fully told, but from all available sources, it appears that the fate of extermination to befall the remnants of Jewish culture in Vilna became known to Antanas Ulpis, the head of the Lithuanian National Book Chamber, which was located in what had formerly been the Church of St. George. Ulpis was not Jewish; he did not know Hebrew or Yiddish, though he had fought beside Jews as a Partisan and had worked with them in his native town of Siauliai. With a small group of colleagues, also not Jewish, Ulpis arranged to hide that remnant rescued by the Paper Brigade in the Church, while distributing unidentified portions to other institutions. Why he did what he did, we do not know. He left no record except that of his actions. Perhaps it was simple defiance of a Soviet order or the commitment to preserve the memory of a community toward which he had friendly feelings, but it is extraordinary to think that he would have risked his life (as he did) and that of his family, if his only goal was to save books and manuscripts he could not read and that had no personal connection to himself. Perhaps he understood that in that selfless act he served something that is not Lithuanian and not simply Jewish but represents the crossroads where we all stand together.

The centerpiece of YIVO's work over the past 7 years has been the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections, a historic project to digitize some 1.5 million documents and some 12,000 books that were saved from the Nazis and the Soviets. The Project based in New York and Vilnius could only have been undertaken with the cooperation and full partnership of three Lithuanian institutions, the Lithuanian government, and the willing support of Lithuanian scholars and educators devoted to helping to restore the Jewish space of Lithuania, in which the history of Jews and Lithuanians can be addressed from all sides and the cataclysm of the Holocaust faced with resolution. It is a sacred secular space of openness and humanness.

The Vilna Online Collections Project has reunited thousands of fragments of Jewish culture torn apart by the Nazis, smashed and sullied by the Soviets, and we are delighted to recognize our Lithuanian partners—The Martynas Mažvydas National Library, the Lithuanian Central State Archives and the Wroblewski Library—that have enabled this Project to be completed and completed on time. More than 15,000 people have visited this website in the first six months after it was completed and we are confident that number will continue to grow. The Online Museum that developed out of it has been viewed by people in 150 countries around the world and is used in numerous classrooms in America, Australia and England to teach the history of Jewish life in Eastern Europe and combat antisemitism. I am delighted to acknowledge here that the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry has translated the first exhibition of the Online Museum into Lithuanian for such use in Lithuanian classrooms. This exhibition is based on the autobiography of a 13-year-old girl, Bebe Epstejn, who was born in Vilna. It was hidden by the Paper Brigade in 1942, rescued by Antanas Ulpis in 1949, discovered by the Lithuanian National Library in

2017 as part of The Vilna Online Collections Project, and now is digitized and available to people around the world.

The saving, recovering and restoring of the prewar YIVO archive and library is a much larger story than simply a matter of preserving Jewish documents and books. It is a story of bringing a civilization out of the obscurity of oblivion and it is also a search for wholeness, reconnection, and a shared human space. A great Ukrainian writer once wrote that “manuscripts don’t burn.” Alas, they do. But the human essence they capture does not. It has survived the greatest cataclysms of history and will continue to survive. That is the story our work together continues.