

## AWAKENING LIVES

### Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust

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First page of "I Do Not Want to Die: My Skeletal Autobiography for the YIVO Contest,"  
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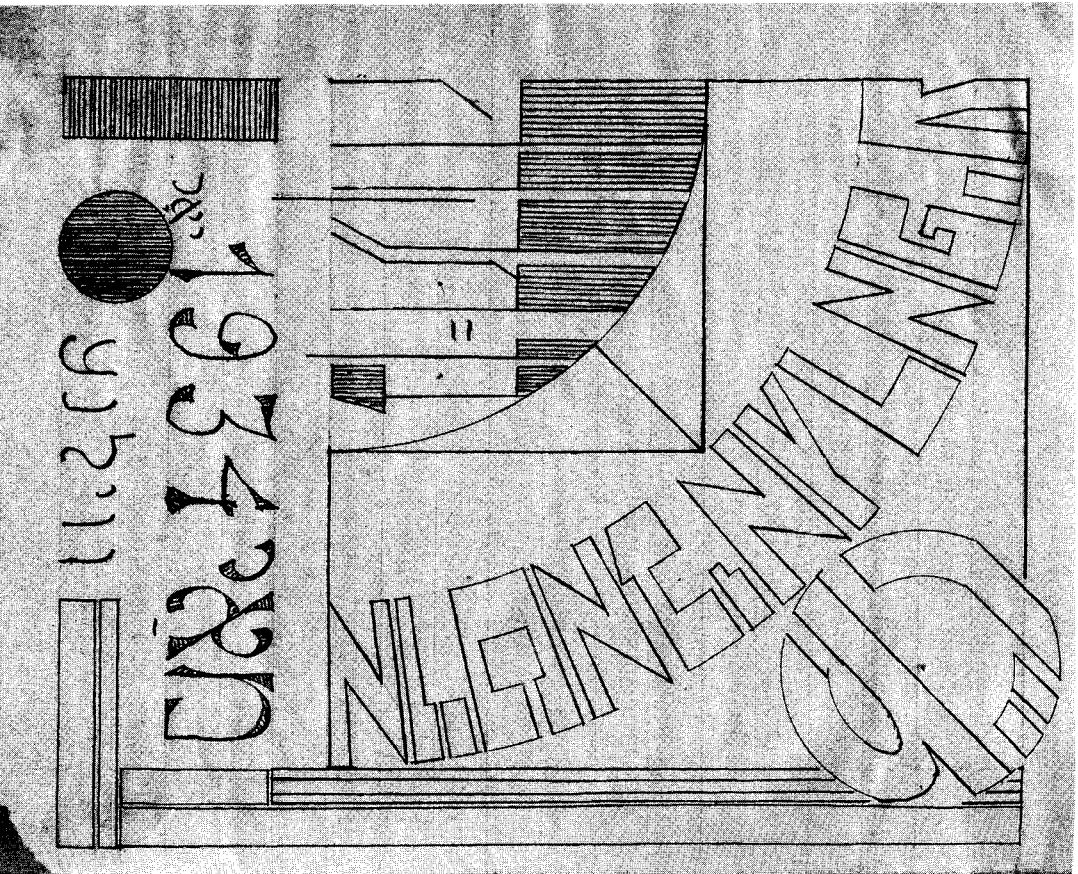
# Introduction

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This volume presents the public with a selection of remarkable documents previously known only to professional scholars of East European Jewry: hundreds of unpublished autobiographies written by Polish Jewish adolescents in the decade before the Holocaust. These are singular documents of Jewish life in Eastern Europe during the years between the two World Wars, and they were gathered in a most unusual manner: through a series of competitions held in 1932, 1934, and 1939 by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Scholars at YIVO invited Jews between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two years old to write their life histories and send them to the institute's headquarters in Vilna, so as to help researchers "become fully aware of the life of the Jewish youth."<sup>1</sup> YIVO offered prizes for those autobiographies judged to be the best ones; in exchange, their authors provided YIVO with prized information about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Indeed, more than a half-century after they were written, these autobiographies offer us insights into Jewish life in interwar Eastern Europe unlike any other source. In addition, the research initiative that inspired their writing and the historical moment that they embody provide rich material for understanding adolescence, autobiography writing, and the special challenges faced by diaspora and minority cultures.

The context in which these autobiographies were created not only informed their authors' writing but was strategic to the inception of this project. During the years between the two World Wars the Polish Republic was home to Europe's largest Jewish population. For all its citizens, life in interwar Poland was strikingly different from the period both before and after. In 1919 the Versailles Treaty redrew the map of Eastern Europe. As a result—after one-and-a-half centuries of a divided existence under the rule of Prussia, tsarist Russia, and the Habsburg Empire—Poland was reunited and declared an independent republic. Following the violent upheavals of World War I and its immediate aftermath, this new state promised greater political stability and democratic rule, and it also offered unprecedented opportunities to Poland's diverse ethnic communities, including its Jews.



Cover of "My Autobiography," by Ben-Tikvah [Son of Hopel], Vilna, May 1934.

The second largest ethnic minority in Poland, Jews comprised about ten percent of Poland's population (according to the 1931 census, there were 3,114,000 Jews in Poland, which had a total population of 31,916,000). Like all its other citizens, Jews were given the right to vote in elections, to organize their own political parties, and to run for office. Poland's public schools gave young Jews access to modern education unknown to previous generations. The constitution of the Polish Republic also stipulated that ethnic minorities had the right to establish their own press and publishing houses, cultural institutions, and educational systems in their own languages. Marshal Józef Piłsudski, a military hero and Poland's popular head of state from 1926 until his death in 1935, supported minority rights and called for interethnic tolerance.<sup>2</sup>

But the optimism many Jews felt at the beginning of the Polish Republic dimmed over time. During the 1930s, worldwide economic depression, the rise of fascism abroad, and growing anti-Semitism at home made life increasingly onerous for Polish Jews. Many of them sought to immigrate, though restrictive quotas made immigration to America, Palestine, and other countries possible for only a very few. In the late 1930s future prospects seemed dim for most Polish Jews, but the terrible fate that awaited them during World War II was beyond their imagining. The war brought an end to the Polish Republic, and by 1945 nine-tenths of Polish Jewry had been murdered.

For reasons that are, perhaps, quite understandable, the audience for works on the destruction of Polish Jewry still far outpaces the audience for works on the history and culture of this community before its demise. In recent decades, though, scholars have attempted to study Polish Jewish life before the Holocaust without looking through lenses tinted by nostalgia or horror, personal or familial loyalty, political or religious commitment, and endeavoring to avoid the dangers of hindsight—that is, of judging Jews living in prewar Poland in light of what we know of their subsequent fate.<sup>3</sup> The work of these scholars reveals the intense and often fractious vitality of interwar Polish Jewry.

This volume contributes to these efforts by presenting the rich complexity of ordinary young Jews' lives as they understood themselves during this remarkable period. As scholars of the period have already demonstrated, the diverse society of Polish Jewry was considerably transformed by the sudden impact of multiple modernizing forces—political reforms, religious innovation, linguistic adaptation, social and economic reeducation—in the years immediately following World War I. The generations of Polish Jews who came of age in the interwar years were, consequently, quite different from their parents. While all generations mark a transition

from one cohort to the next, the extent of political upheaval, economic disarray, social mobility (both downward and upward), and innovative political and religious ideologies encountered by interwar Polish Jews was unprecedented.

Therefore, it is not surprising to find a gulf separating the generation of Jews represented by the autobiographies in this volume, who were born just before, during, or immediately after World War I, from their parents, who were born in the relatively more stable 1890s or during the first years of the twentieth century. When this older generation was young—to cite only a few examples—there was no Polish republic to relate to as citizens, no compulsory public educational system, little industrialization, much more limited political mobilization, no sustained worldwide Depression, no local fascists or widespread (albeit clandestine) communist organizations, and virtually no organized Jewish "Orthodoxy." But their children had to grapple with these sudden, new developments as well as with all the usual vicissitudes of adolescent life. To these young people the dislocations they experienced seemed to have both positive and negative consequences, full of uncharted dangers and unprecedented aspirations.

The YIVO Institute, which solicited these autobiographies in an effort to understand this generation of young Jews and assist them in their struggles, was itself an exemplary innovation of Jewish society in interwar Poland. Founded in Vilna in 1925, YIVO pioneered the modern scholarly study of East European Jewish life from an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together historians, linguists, psychologists, economists, folklorists, and sociologists. Within a few years of its creation, the institute established a special division for the study of youth, known in Yiddish as *Yugendforschung*, or *Yugfor* for short. Under the leadership of YIVO's research director, the linguist Max Weinreich, *Yugfor* conceived and oversaw these autobiography competitions as its main project.

YIVO's approach to the study of Jewish youth was rooted in an ideology that had distinct intellectual and political implications. Though interested in studying Jewish traditions, YIVO was an ardently secular institution. It not only functioned in Yiddish, the traditional vernacular of East European Jews, but considered the cultivation of Yiddish language and culture to be central to its mission. Moreover, while organized as a professional research institute, YIVO had a strong populist agenda and sought ways to engage and to serve the general Jewish community. And, unlike many other Jewish cultural institutions, which placed their hopes on the future of Jewry elsewhere, YIVO was committed to legitimating and sustaining Jewish life in Eastern Europe. In this regard, YIVO epitomized the diaspora nationalist ideology of *doikayt* (Yiddish for "hereness"), an East European Jewish

political principle that championed the legitimacy of Jewish communities wherever they were found. *Doikert* offered an alternative to Zionism or territorialism, which repudiated the diaspora and advocated the creation of a new and separate Jewish polity.<sup>4</sup>

YIVO's larger aspirations are reflected in the way that *Yugfor* invited participation in its autobiography contests. The institute urged contestants to write in detail about their earliest memories, their childhood experiences, their relations with their parents and siblings, their sexual development, their education and work experiences, as well as what they read, what they thought, what they hoped for in the future. Responding to these instructions, participants offered extensive and sometimes surprisingly candid accounts of their lives, which reflect great depth of insight and diversity of experience.

Indeed, those who entered YIVO's youth autobiography contests were not limited to the institute's core constituency of secular Yiddishists and diaspora nationalists. Over the course of the three contests, YIVO received autobiographies from Jewish youth in more than a dozen countries. And while most of the entries came from Poland, these authors range over virtually the entire spectrum of Polish Jewry: Orthodox, communist, Bundist, and Zionist (left, right and center); rich, poor, and in-between; Yiddishists, Hebraists, Polonophiles; rural, small-town, and large-city residents; in almost every possible permutation and combination.<sup>5</sup>

Virtually each of these autobiographies, therefore, challenges generalizations that both scholars and lay people have made about interwar Polish Jewry. The young lives detailed in these texts were as jumbled and convoluted and essentially impervious to simple categorization as our own. These texts caution against simplifying the experiences of Polish Jewish youth by fitting them neatly into such categories as religious vs. secular, socialist vs. Zionist, rich vs. poor—dichotomies that not only oversimplify the past but distort it.

Thus, historians note that this generation of Polish Jews was highly politicized, whether active in specifically Jewish movements—the various Zionist parties, the Jewish Workers' Bund, the Orthodox Agudas Yisroel, and so on—or in Poland's communist and socialist parties. But these autobiographies reveal a far more nuanced and intellectually challenging picture of political mobilization and stratification. Jewish adolescents regularly crossed the boundaries of political and religious movements, both privately and in public. Some autobiographies report members of one political movement secretly attending meetings of another and then switching allegiances; they describe young men and women serially or even simultaneously belonging to rival political organizations due to their convictions,

clubs, changing perceptions of political realities, or even romantic attractions to other members.

In some of these life histories, political engagement is articulated as a series of crises of faith. The autobiography of a twenty-two-year-old young man writing under the pseudonym "The Stormer," for example, recounts his traditional study of rabbinics in a small-town yeshiva, followed by recruitment into a communist cell by one of his cousins in the city of Łódź. (In something of an epitomizing moment, he writes of making a trip home for Passover, packing into his bag both illegal political propaganda that his cousin gives him to distribute to the local young people and a bottle of kosher wine for his family.) He then offers accounts of training with the Jewish sports organization Maccabi, a visit to a Zionist training farm run by Hashomer Hatsair, trade union activism, as well as a remarkable—though ultimately unsuccessful—journey through Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria in an attempt to emigrate illegally to Palestine.

Just as these autobiographies evince highly idiosyncratic, hybridized political profiles, they reflect similarly complex educational backgrounds, including self-instruction as well as formal schooling. Typically, these authors describe attending more than one kind of school, sometimes simultaneously, thereby garnering complementary, if not contradictory, instruction. The nineteen-year-old autobiographer known to us as "Esther" writes with equal passion about attending a newly established Bey's Yaakov school, which provided an elementary education for Orthodox Jewish girls, and about the intellectual discoveries she makes in the local Polish public school; she is as inspired by the words of Sara Schenirer, the founder of the *Reys Yaakov* schools, as she is by the verses of the nineteenth-century Polish romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz, a volume of which she requests as an award after making a public speech on Pilsudski's name-day.

Nor can these authors be readily characterized as Yiddishists, Hebraists, or Polonophiles, simply by virtue of the language in which they chose to compose their autobiography. Many offer accounts of the challenges, as well as the delights, of living in a complexly multilingual society. One autobiography, written in 1934 by a twenty-year-old young man from a small town in central Galicia, begins with the very question of language choice:

As I sit down to write my autobiography, I don't actually know which language to use: Yiddish, Hebrew, or even Polish. There are issues that I think about in Yiddish; these are primarily matters connected to daily life. I think about questions concerning Palestine and Zionism in Hebrew. Then there are also many issues that I think about in Polish: things that have to do with school, Polish history, world history, and

the like. I've decided, however, to write in Yiddish, as I expect that my autobiography will consist of my everyday experiences.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the gap between parents and their children, described so prominently in many of these autobiographies, appears to be not so much ideological as experiential, born of the rapid social, economic, and political changes in interwar Poland. Most of the autobiographies describe an increasingly grim economic reality that weighed heavier on the authors as they came of age and faced the challenge of making their own way in the world. These autobiographies portray progressive impoverishment, experienced by so much of interwar Polish Jewry, in ways often not communicated as effectively in literary accounts or memoirs written after World War II, whose authors sometimes tend to romanticize their material circumstances in retrospect. Quite a few of the autobiographers also offer extensive accounts of child neglect and even child abuse, challenging idealized stereotypes of "Jewish family values." Such episodes are likewise seldom encountered in postwar accounts. Often written by a family's sole survivor, these accounts are generally more likely to eulogize relatives lost during the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup>

Another surprise in light of other accounts of this period, especially postwar memoirs, is how little attention the autobiographers represented here devote to the encounter with anti-Semitism in everyday life, as opposed to the large-scale anti-Semitism that restricted social and professional mobility, as well as access to advanced schooling or to professional careers. Indeed, more than one autobiography in this volume juxtaposes the author's personal friendship with a non-Jew against the larger societal backdrop of growing intolerance. Finally, there is little in these autobiographies about the rise of Nazism in Germany and its possible implications for Poland. This is true even in those life histories written in 1939, such as the work of the twenty-year-old author known to us as "G.W.," who writes at the end of his autobiography: "Young people live with hope and faith in a bright future. Those who are deeply convinced, believe. But there is a question as to when that day will come. When do we stop hoping? No one has determined this yet."

This is perhaps the most striking lesson of these texts. It is virtually impossible for the reader today to ponder the lives of East European Jews in these years without reflecting on the horrors that would soon come. For the reader knows what was unknowable for the authors: that they would most likely be murdered only a short time after writing these life stories. Or, if they were fortunate enough to be part of the fraction of Polish Jewry that survived the Holocaust, they would witness the cruel and

unfathomable killings of their parents, siblings, friends, teachers—the destruction of their society and culture as a whole. Even some of the most ardent Zionists among them, committed in principle to the belief that there was no future for Polish Jewry, were nonetheless unmistakably hopeful about their own futures. Indeed, the extent of the hopefulness of these accounts may be their most unsettling characteristic. And yet, the more difficult it is for us to fathom today how the autobiographers in this volume could not have seen what was ahead, the more valuable are their accounts.

#### THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND OF YIVO'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY CONTESTS

YIVO's decision to study Jewish adolescents during the 1930s—and to do so by encouraging them to enter an autobiography contest—was unusual on several counts. After all, the authors of these accounts were neither professional writers nor famous figures, and they were too young to have achieved much of note. Rather, they were ordinary individuals who spoke in their own voices about their everyday lives at a critical historical moment. Writing at a turning point in their lives, their personal histories were defined throughout by the experience of coming of age. At the conclusion of her autobiography, for example, "Escher" reflects, "Perhaps this autobiography will change the course of my life. This is something new for me. I have never before examined my life seriously."<sup>8</sup>

Adolescents were of special interest to YIVO because they held the future of Jewish life in their hands. Many young Polish Jews, facing a desperate present and a bleak future in the 1930s, were eager to emigrate, an option that deeply troubled Max Weinreich, who was committed to a Jewish future in Eastern Europe. Writing about the *Yugfor* project in 1935, he asserted that the saying "He who holds the youth, holds the future" had become banal and needed to be replaced by the more fitting epigram: "He who holds the future, holds the youth."<sup>9</sup>

YIVO's ultimate goal was to enable a Jewish future in Eastern Europe, no matter how unpromising the immediate prospects. The key to the institute's own survival was the very generation that Weinreich proposed to study. YIVO hoped that contestants would become more involved in its work and offered to send them the institute's newsletter, *Yedies fun YIVO*. YIVO also encouraged contestants to maintain contact with the institute in the future and later asked them to send YIVO materials regarding their towns and regions.

The study of youth was thus a matter of ideological urgency. For several decades, social and political movements had been mobilizing European youth, including growing numbers of Jews, by offering them a total and alternative way of life, the chance to continue their development after they left school, and a program for the future. Weinreich understood the power of these movements from his own experience in SKIF, the Bund's youth movement. Consistent with the view that youngsters first became interested in political movements by about the age of seventeen, the autobiography contests specified that contestants had to be between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, thereby defining "youth" as the period from political awakening to self-sufficient adulthood.<sup>9</sup> This historically conditioned phase in the life cycle was fundamental to youth research as an interdisciplinary field of study familiar to Weinreich. What Viennese scholars termed *Jugendforschung* had developed in relation to the historical unfolding of its subject, beginning with the emergence of youth movements in Central Europe in the 1890s. Youth research thus signaled the convergence of a developmental stage—adolescence—and an historically specific social formation: youth movements and youth culture.<sup>10</sup>

Weinreich formally launched YIVO's *Yugntforschung* project on 1 June 1934. He had only recently returned to Vilna from more than a year abroad, where he had been involved in a variety of scholarly encounters that were fundamental to the design of *Yugfor*'s goals and methodology.<sup>11</sup> During the 1932–33 academic year he studied the impact of culture on personality at Yale University with anthropologist Edward Sapir and sociologist John Dollard. During the fall of 1933 Weinreich studied child and adolescent psychology at the University of Vienna with Charlotte Bühler. While in Vienna, he also met with Siegfried Bernfeld, a psychoanalyst specializing in adolescence.<sup>12</sup>

Bernfeld's work was to prove especially influential on Weinreich's study of Jewish youth. Psychoanalysis, which was of great interest to Weinreich, had concentrated almost entirely on adults in relation to their early childhood. The field had paid relatively little attention to puberty, which Bernfeld defined broadly as the period between twelve and twenty years old—that is, the period between childhood and adulthood, from the onset of a significant increase in libido to independence. He recognized not only phases within this extended period of "adolescence," but also the cultural and historical specificity of any periodization of the life cycle.<sup>13</sup> Wedding radical politics with psychoanalysis, Bernfeld believed that youth culture comprised a distinct social alternative for young people, which offered an implicit critique of authoritarian and regimented middle-class life at home and in school.<sup>14</sup>

Consistent with his commitment to the social emancipation of youth, Bernfeld believed that qualitative rather than experimental studies were in order. That is, the best evidence would come from young people themselves—their diaries, journals, autobiographies, letters, and literary and artistic efforts, rather than from controlled psychological studies. In this spirit, Bernfeld established the Archive for Jewish Youth Culture in 1913 and the Jewish Institute for Youth Culture and Education in 1922, both based in Vienna. Bernfeld is credited as the first person to bring a multidisciplinary perspective to youth research and a psychoanalytic approach to pedagogy.<sup>15</sup>

On his return to Vilna, Weinreich attempted to place YIVO at the forefront of social scientific research by applying the theories and methods that he had encountered in New Haven and Vienna to the study of contemporary Jewish life in Eastern Europe.<sup>16</sup> YIVO's *Yugfor* project not only attempted to align European and American scholarly approaches to the study of Jewish adolescents; it also marked a threshold in the development of the institute's overall approach to the study of Jews. When it was founded in 1925, YIVO's research priorities were philological and historical. Consistent with the goal of "rescuing from loss and oblivion the relics of the Jewish past and the gems of Jewish folk creation,"<sup>17</sup> the first major project of YIVO's Department of Psychology and Pedagogy was the collection of detailed memoirs of *kheyder*, the traditional school where Jewish children began their religious instruction, learning to read Hebrew and to recite prayers. During 1927–28, researchers elicited information from respondents ranging in age from nineteen to eighty by means of questionnaires published in *Yedies fun YIVO*. Elderly informants, fully formed adults with long memories, were valued as repositories of cultural information, though not as subjects to be studied in themselves.

But by 1930 Weinreich had started to reorient the agenda of YIVO's Department of Psychology and Pedagogy by making the "psyche of the Jewish child" a research topic.<sup>18</sup> Two years later, the first autobiography contest proceeded from the idea that the adolescent, a person in the process of becoming, was a valuable subject of study in his or her own right. By the end of the second autobiography contest, held in 1934, YIVO formally launched *Yugfor* as a major research project. In contrast with the earlier *kheyder* initiative, *Yugfor* would focus on individuals and on a pivotal point in their personal development, rather than on collective experience within an institution. Also, YIVO would study contemporary Jewish life, rather than the past. The research would be based on documents that young people themselves created, rather than on their answers to someone else's questions. The contest instructions did, of course, guide the autobio-

graphers, but above all they encouraged contestants to speak freely about their lives.

Over the course of YIVO's three youth autobiography contests the number of submissions and their geographic range increased. The first contest, held in 1932, was addressed to "the Jewish youth of Vilna and the Vilna region." Thirty-four young people responded.<sup>19</sup> The second contest, held in 1934, attracted 304 entries from twelve countries, far exceeding the institute's expectations.<sup>20</sup> So pleased was YIVO with the response that the deadline was extended by several months so that more young people could enter, and the number of prizes was increased.<sup>21</sup> The third contest, which was announced in the fall of 1938, brought in 289 submissions.<sup>22</sup> Cash prizes for this contest ranged from 150 zloty (about 30 U.S. dollars) for first prize to 25 zloty (about 5 dollars) for fifth and sixth prize. These were substantial sums in Poland at the time, considering that some of the contestants did not even have enough money to buy the stamps to mail in their autobiographies. YIVO publications were to be awarded to the remaining nineteen winners. All in all, the three contests yielded 627 autobiographies, in addition to diaries, journals, letters, photographs, drawings, literary efforts, and other materials. YIVO researchers followed up on some of the autobiographies and interviewed some of their authors' parents and teachers.<sup>23</sup>

The autobiography contests suited Weinreich's goals for several reasons. First, YIVO was a young institution with meager resources, and contests were an inexpensive and efficient way to collect a vast amount of data. Moreover, such contests were already an established practice in Polish sociology. The Institute for Social Economy in Warsaw collected 800 autobiographies of the unemployed in 1931 and about 500 peasant autobiographies in 1933, to cite only two examples.<sup>24</sup> As a result of such efforts, "the collection of autobiographies agglomerated in the archives of Polish research institutes is quantitatively and qualitatively unique."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Polish sociology in this period also focused on contemporary life and "the young generation."<sup>26</sup>

It was Florian Znaniecki, the founder of modern sociology as an academic discipline in interwar Poland, who encouraged the collecting of autobiographies. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, coauthored by Znaniecki and William I. Thomas at the University of Chicago, was exemplary for its use of personal documents. This multi-volume work, published between 1918 and 1920, includes 10,000 letters exchanged between Polish peasants who had immigrated to Chicago and the families they left behind in Poland, as well as a lengthy autobiography of a Polish immigrant. Not only did Weinreich admire *The Polish Peasant*, but he also published

## Table of Statistics

In his postwar studies of YIVO's youth autobiography contests of the 1930s, sociologist Moshe Kligsberg tabulated the following statistics, based on the extant materials housed in the YIVO Archives in New York.\* These represent slightly less than half of all the autobiographies originally submitted to YIVO; most of the others were destroyed during World War II or missing after the war. Others not included in his statistical survey are autobiographies sent from outside Poland, as well as texts for which some information was missing or which were otherwise incomplete.

<b>Total number of autobiographies surveyed:</b> 302	out of 627 (48.2%)
1932 contest:	17 (5.6% of survey) out of 34 (50%)
1934 contest:	176 (58.3% of survey) out of 304 (57.9%)
1939 contest:	109 (36.1% of survey) out of 289 (37.7%)
<b>Language of autobiographies</b>	
Yiddish:	223 (73.8%)
Polish:	71 (23.6%)
Hebrew:	8 (2.6%)

### Length of autobiographies

Average length: 59 pages ("of standard notebook size")

Longest autobiography: 800 pages

(The required minimum was 25 pages.)

### Sex of authors

Male: 236 (78%)

Female: 66 (22%)

\* Adapted from Moses Kligsberg, "Child and Adolescent Behavior under Stress: An Analytical Guide to a Collection of Autobiographies of Jewish Young Men and Women in Poland (1932-1939) . . ." [report] (New York: YIVO, 1965), p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> "A Study of Jewish Youth: Program and Method" in 1935 in *Przegląd socjologiczny*, the Polish sociology journal founded by Znaniecki.

The theoretical justification for using personal documents rested on the sociological importance that Znaniecki and Thomas accorded the individual as a totality, the primacy of experience, and a view of socialization "as the product of a continual interaction of individual consciousness

and the objective social reality."<sup>26</sup> It followed that "personal life-records, as complete as possible, constitute the *perfect* type of sociological material," despite the practical difficulties of gathering enough diaries and processing the massive amount of material generated by autobiography contests.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Weinreich valued autobiographies for what they could reveal about the impact of culture on personality, particularly from a psycho-analytic perspective. Such evidence would allow Weinreich to test the thesis guiding YIVO's *Yugfor* project, which he had termed the "nationality" problem. This problem expressed itself in the double insecurity of the Jewish child: "First, the child discovers that he is Jewish and that he belongs to a disadvantaged group." Second, "the adolescent begins to deliberate earnestly about his place in the community and his own future," only to be thwarted by discrimination from realizing his aspirations.<sup>28</sup>

Through their autobiographies, Jewish youth would speak in their own voice about this experience. As Weinreich declared, "To understand the situation, we must listen to the voice of youth themselves; they alone must tell about their psychological and social problems."<sup>29</sup> Youth would be taken seriously as experts on themselves. It was Weinreich's hope that their personal revelations would illuminate how the psychology of a national group develops in response to the situation of disadvantage. The crisis in Eastern Europe, as he saw it, was an unbridgeable generation gap. The autobiographies would provide a solid research foundation for addressing this crisis. Seeking the participation of the full range of Jewish youth, announcements for all three contests stressed that education, class, occupation, or political affiliation were of no consequence. "Bad style" or the ordinariness of their lives was no obstacle to winning a prize: "Don't think that only an individual with extraordinary experiences can enter." Submissions would be judged on sincerity, accuracy, and detail: "Don't think that little things are not important." If anything, contestants were warned not to make their autobiographies "more interesting" by making things up or using flowery language; it was better to be candid and direct. As for the length of the submissions, the more the better and not less than twenty-five pages of a notebook.<sup>30</sup> (Very few submissions kept to the minimum length; many were as long as the lengthier autobiographies in this volume and several even longer.)

To encourage the autobiographers to write about intimate details of their lives, YIVO guaranteed them anonymity. The only information the contestants needed to provide was age, gender, and a pseudonym of some kind. The writer's real name and address were to appear only inside a sealed envelope that was to be submitted with the autobiography. That envelope would be opened only after the prizes had been decided so that the awards

id be mailed to the winners. Any writer who did not wish to reveal or her real name under any circumstances was offered the option of providing an address to which a prize could eventually be sent.

While contestants were free to choose what to write about, the guidelines for the first contest encouraged them to address the following topics:

You and your family, war years, teachers, schools and what they gave you. Boyfriends, girlfriends. Youth organizations, [political] party life, and what they gave you. How you came to your occupation or how you are planning to come to your occupation. What events in your life made the greatest impression on you.<sup>31</sup>

Announcements for the two subsequent contests added several additional guidelines: though writers could arrange their accounts as they wished, chronological order was recommended as the "easiest" approach. Small, but telling, adjustments were made to the list of topics that authors were encouraged to address. The announcement for the second contest added the instruction to reflect on "relationships" among family members and "relationships" among their friends. The specification of "relationships" is subtle but important indication of what Weinreich had learned at Yale.<sup>32</sup> The announcement for the third contest, issued late in 1938, expressly encouraged the writers to reflect on the challenges they faced in "these difficult days."

Since the contest was a means of gathering personal documents, the announcement for the second contest took advantage of the opportunity to ask for diaries and told contestants that those who submitted diaries increased their chances of winning prizes for their autobiographies. Scholars had debated the relative value of different types of personal documents. Bihler, a psychologist, preferred diaries and biographies, considering autobiographies unreliable because they were personally authored after the fact. Dollard, a sociologist, favored life histories, because a trained researcher could elicit information from his subject that was directly relevant to his research. Biographies and oral histories were also more difficult to collect because they required professional researchers to create them. Autobiographies were the easiest to gather, particularly by means of contests. YIVO collected everything that it could.

The third of YIVO's youth autobiography contests was also the most international of the three. Announcements in many languages went out to Jewish youth throughout Europe, North and South America, Australia, South Africa, and Palestine. The instructions *Yugfor* issued in 1938 stipulated what contestants in the earlier contests had already assumed



when they wrote in Yiddish, Polish, Hebrew, Russian, and German—namely, that “each contestant may write in the language most convenient for him.”

Submissions for the third contest were due 1 May 1939, and the prizes were to be announced on 1 September of that year.<sup>33</sup> With a sense of mounting crisis, the announcement explained the purpose of the contest more fully:

We want to become fully aware of the life of the Jewish youth in these difficult days. We want to know what barriers stand before the young man who wants to find his way in the world; what conflicts arise between him and both his immediate and general environment, as well as within himself. We want to know about the people who found it possible to overcome hardships and also about those who have not yet succeeded. When we shall be able to collect this material, we shall be able to learn a great deal, and it is quite possible that from the mistakes and failures of one individual as well as from the successes of another, we shall be able to make deductions for the whole of Jewish youth.<sup>34</sup>

Although contestants were again assured that “a bad literary style, an unpracticed pen are, therefore, no hindrances to participation in this contest and even to winning first prize,” they were also admonished against waxing literary. Perhaps because some who entered in the previous contest had not heeded the advice to write in a plain and direct style, the announcement for the third contest stated in no uncertain terms that “YIVO does not propose to discover new writers through the medium of this competition.” The tone of the announcement vacillated between patience in explaining the value of “little things”—“actually interesting sociological and psychological conclusions may often be derived just from such details”—to impatience with “general statements about ‘hard times’ and the ‘lost generation.’” Length was encouraged “so that the personality of the writer may become clearer.” Psychological insight was prized above all. These personal documents were not intended to provide ethnographic descriptions of daily life per se; they were to reveal the inner life of Jewish youth at a pivotal historical moment and place.

By all accounts, including the hundreds of inquiries and submissions and the enthusiasm expressed in the autobiographies themselves, Jewish youth welcomed the opportunity to pour out their hearts and reflect on their lives. No doubt the prospect of substantial cash prizes and the validation that would come with any prize, even a YIVO publication, as well as the possibility of seeing one’s own words in print, intensified their interest.

hoping that some of the contestants would want to collaborate on *Yugfor* in the future, YIVO sent them copies of Max Weinreich’s *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt* (The Way to Our Youth), which the institute had published in 1935. This book drew on the autobiographies submitted to the first two contests and outlined the methodology for YIVO’s youth research project. When he began work on *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt* in New Haven in 1933, Weinreich did not plan more than a long essay. It would set out his central theme (the psychology of belonging to a disadvantaged minority) and introduce the “new discipline of culture and personality to the study of East European Jews, and their youth in particular.”<sup>35</sup> By the time he finished it in Vilna two years later, this book as well as YIVO’s youth research project, had come to epitomize the institute’s commitment to the diaspora nationalist principle of *doikayt*.

*Der veg tsu undzer yugnt* offered a psychological analysis of a generation that either assimilated, emigrated, or flocked to political organizations, particularly Zionist ones, in an effort to escape their hopeless circumstances. Difficult as it may be to understand his position today, Weinreich’s diagnosis of the situation facing Jewish youth in Poland was psychological in maturity: they were simply running away from their problems. Facing the situation and dealing with it—the essence of *doikayt*—was the only mature and healthy psychological response. Psychological analysis thus became the site of a displaced political subject, and the work of YIVO became the solution. Every document, demographic datum, photograph, questionnaire, folk song, book, artifact, and autobiography that YIVO added to its collection affirmed Jewish rootedness in Eastern Europe. Every effort to gather these materials, preserve and study them, and disseminate research based on them laid the ground for a Jewish future in Poland. Participation in the work of YIVO was a way of affirming being a Jew in Poland.<sup>36</sup>

It is, sadly, impossible to know what insights the Vilna YIVO would have gained from seeing the *Yugfor* project to its completion. On the very day YIVO planned to announce the winners of the third autobiography contest Germany invaded Poland, starting World War II. Weinreich was then en route to a conference in Brussels; unable to return to Vilna, he traveled to the United States, arriving on 19 March 1940. Immediately he moved YIVO’s headquarters to its branch office in New York. During the war, YIVO was liquidated by the German army, which confiscated much of its vast library and archival collections and eventually murdered most of its staff. Some of the institute’s most prized holdings were hidden or smuggled out by YIVO employees, often at great personal risk. A large part of YIVO’s collections remained in Vilna, where they were seized by Soviet authorities when they took control of the Baltic states after the war;<sup>37</sup> still other materials were

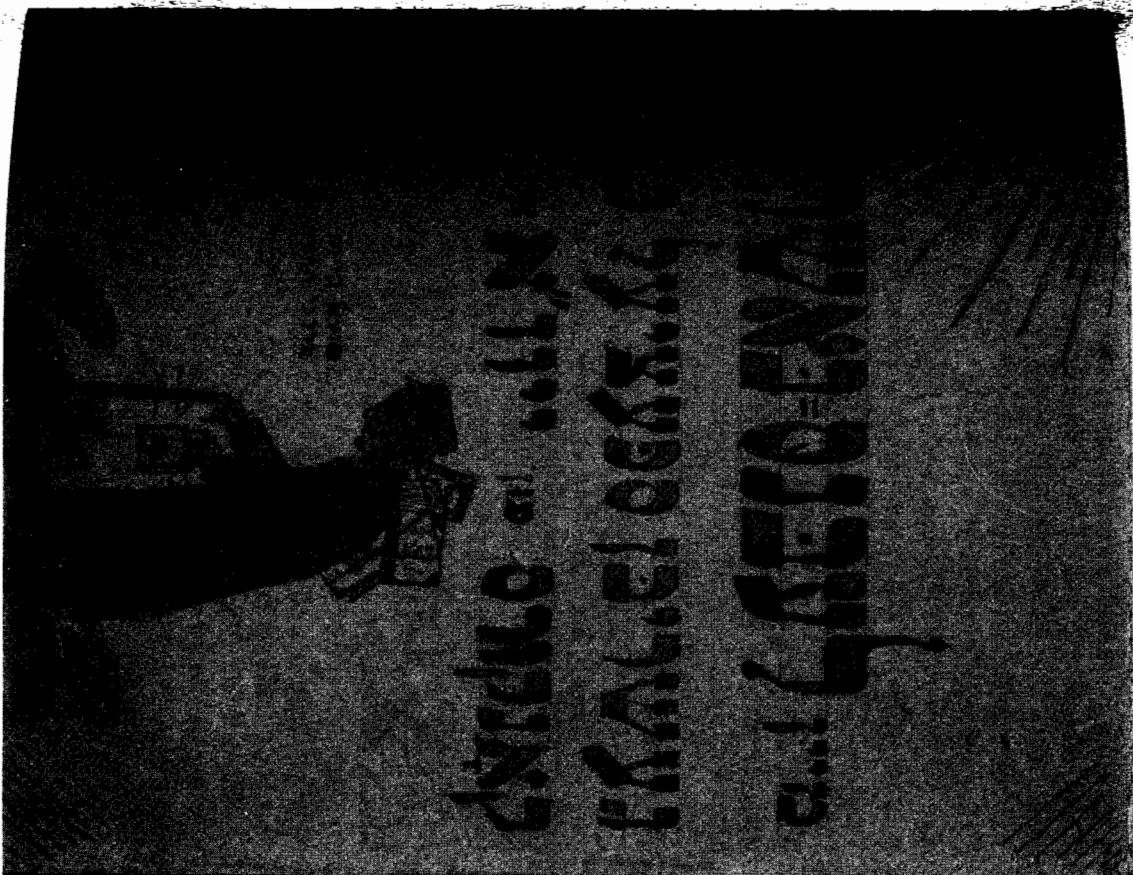
lost or destroyed. After the war the New York YIVO managed to reclaim 350 of these 627 autobiographies, along with other material that had been confiscated by the Germans; it is from these that the fifteen texts that appear in this volume were selected. During 1940 Weinreich tried to establish a Jewish youth project in the United States, but without success. Autobiography contests, however, continued to play an important role in YIVO's work. In 1942 YIVO solicited the best American Jewish immigrant autobiography on the theme "Why I Left Europe and What I Have Accomplished in America," and in 1946 the institute ran a contest among Jewish soldiers and veterans for the best essays on the subject "My Experiences and Observations as a Jew in World War II."<sup>38</sup>

As late as 1943 Weinreich stated in YIVO's academic journal, *YIVO-bleter*, that he planned to return to Vilna once the war was over and rebuild a YIVO that would have "two centers," one in New York and the other in Vilna.<sup>39</sup> That was not to be. By 1945 *YIVO-bleter* was mourning the destruction of European Jewry and with it the YIVO in Vilna and so many of those who had once sent it material, including the young participants in the autobiography contests: "In the destruction of our people, YIVO mourns its own disaster. The Jewish community in Eastern Europe, out of whose direct needs YIVO grew, has practically disappeared. There is practically no one left from the thousands of correspondents upon whom YIVO's network across Jewish cities and towns depended. Virtually none of the people who built YIVO by their daily efforts and by giving their heart and soul survive."<sup>40</sup>

### THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE YIVO AUTOBIOGRAPHS

In the 1930s, YIVO was primarily interested in these youth autobiographies for the information they could provide social scientists seeking to analyze contemporary, and increasingly urgent, societal problems. The *Yugfor* scholars did not value these texts as literary works—indeed, they discouraged the autobiographers from approaching the task as a creative writing exercise. Today, however, we read these autobiographies with a very different eye. The literary inclinations of their authors are not something we strive to set aside—indeed, this is key to what makes these life histories so compelling to read and to study. Therefore, it is especially important to consider the literary context in which these young writers crafted their autobiographies, for their efforts are as much a product of what their authors read, and how they read, as what they experienced.

Indeed, all of the autobiographies in this volume, however much they differ from one another, are the life histories of *readers*. The experience of



Cover of "A Description of My Life, Written Especially for the YIVO Contest," Vilna, 1932. The illustration's Hebrew inscription, "I was a wanderer on the paths of life," pays homage to Perez Sosenkins' nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, *Hato'eh bedarkhei ha-hayyim* (The Wanderer on the Paths of Life).

reading secular literature occupies a prominent place in these life histories, and the act of reading is frequently depicted as a catalyst in their authors' lives. This is an especially important element of these texts, given that the genre of autobiography itself can be understood as the rereading of personal experience through the prism of fiction. The initiation into modern secular literature gave rise, in no small part, to the autobiographical impulse among European Jews. As scholars have frequently noted, there is almost no Jewish autobiographical literature prior to this encounter with European belles lettres.<sup>41</sup>

The notion of telling one's personal history through the narrative idioms of fiction, especially the novel, appears in Western literature as early as Rousseau.<sup>42</sup> Among East European Jews the impact of this kind of literature came relatively late, in comparison to their fellow Europeans. As a consequence, East European Jewry experienced centuries of Western European literary development within the span of a few generations, and it is only in the 1860s that rudimentary equivalents of the novel began to appear in Hebrew and Yiddish.<sup>43</sup> These were the work of a numerically insignificant, extremely marginalized avant-garde of aesthetic and ethical reformers known as *maskilin*, proponents of the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment movement.

*Maskilin* and their ideological offspring thus encountered the treasury of Western literary tradition simultaneously, as one encounters works of fine art from the ancient to modern periods in a museum. In Hebrew and Yiddish periodicals of the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, it is not unusual to find within one volume translations of the Greek and Roman classics, of Nietzsche and Byron, discussions of Maeterlinck, Bergson, Goethe, Tolstoy, and so on. Or consider how the pioneering Yiddish and Hebrew modernist Y.L. Peretz recalls, in his memoirs, his introduction to the realm of Western literature as an adolescent: "The books had been shelved at random, with novels, scientific works, and serial romances all mixed up and scattered, especially the translations from the French—Alexandre Dumas, Eugene Sue, Victor Hugo, and so on. . . . Soon after, I came across the Napoleonic Code in Zanyavsky's translation. . . . I was amazed! Here were principles of law without the Talmud's ubiquitous Reuben and Simon!"<sup>44</sup> Continuing with Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* and works by the philosopher Edward von Hartmann and the biologist Carl Vogt, Peretz describes his experience during the mid-1860s. But this account could well have been taken from one of the YIVO autobiographers, writing seven decades later; it was as if many Jewish youth in the interwar period recapitulated the experience of the early pioneers of the Eastern European *Haskalah*. Consider, for example, the testimony

autobiographer from the 1934 contest, a twenty-one-year-old male *Hasidic* background, who recalls his introduction to the world of literature, at the age of fifteen, in Bresler's library in Warsaw:<sup>45</sup>

At the time I knew as much about literature as a Cossack knows how to recite the Psalms in Hebrew. The first works I read were by Mendele Mocher Seforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Linetski. . . . From day to day I became, so to speak, newly born. . . . Lermontov, Pushkin, Yessenin, Tagore, Baudelaire, Rainer Maria Rilke, Heinrich Heine—these writers showed me a bright, new world. . . . Then I started reading proletarian literature, all in Yiddish: Reisen, Rosenfeld, Vinchevsky, Leivik, Schwarzman, Broderzon, Mami-Leyb . . . , Hofstein, Kharik, Fefer, Kvitko, Markish, Bergelson. . . .<sup>46</sup>

And as his autobiography becomes, in effect, an inventory of his avid reading, the young author's list continues with works by Gorki, France, Barbuse, Tolstoy, Rolland, Shakespeare, Schopenhauer, Weininger, as well as others.

The centrality of the act of reading for this generation of East European Jews, as evinced in the YIVO autobiographies, is corroborated by statistics compiled by sociologist Moshe Kligsberg. After fleeing his native Poland, Kligsberg became a research associate at YIVO in New York in 1941. There he conducted the first postwar analysis of these youth autobiographies and published articles on them in English and Yiddish. Drawing on Polish population surveys of 1921 and 1931, Kligsberg estimates that there were some 450,000 Jews between the ages of fourteen to twenty during the interwar years. A member of this generation himself, he provides the following testimony:<sup>47</sup>

On the basis of many years of direct observation I can posit that at least two-thirds of us read books. On average we read one book a week (usually on a day off, Saturday or Sunday, the book was exchanged for another). There were, of course, some who read little, but to compensate for this, there were many more who devoured books, several a week or even on a daily basis. Thus, in the course of a year, Jewish youth in Poland had read fifteen million books in their entirety—that is, every library was, on average, read through in the course of fifteen years.<sup>47</sup>

In these autobiographies, the act of reading almost invariably correlates with a marked turn toward introspection, a development associated with the discovery of a language with which to depict the inner self. It is

thus no coincidence that these adolescents' initiation into literature was often accompanied by the decision to write a journal. The YIVO autobiographies reveal a generation of diarists, and this regardless of gender—the private journal being a disproportionately female phenomenon in other cultures.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, so many diaries were submitted along with autobiographies in the 1932 and 1934 competitions that Max Weinreich addressed the special methodological issues raised by youth diaries in *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt*.<sup>49</sup>

The YIVO autobiographers offer most eloquent testimony with respect to the relationship between literature and self-awareness. “Esther,” for example, who was born into a strict hasidic household, had to conspire with her mother to register for the library at the Polish school she attended, in defiance of her father’s wishes. She writes of her experience:

I devoted myself to reading with a passion. Within the red and blue covers of the library’s books I found an enchanted world, filled with regal characters involved in wondrous tales that completely captivated my young mind. I read in secret, so as to escape my father’s notice. It hurt me that he would not allow me to read. . . . And the more I read, the more I kept my thoughts a secret. . . . I became a world unto myself.

Esther’s father was perhaps not altogether misguided in his extreme misgivings concerning the books his daughter read—which included the lives of Christian martyrs, with whom she felt a degree of affinity—and the marked alteration in her behavior as a result of her reading. In a more stable cultural setting, the transmission of books from one generation to another often serves to consolidate the family unit and to establish connections between the family and the wider community. But it is clear from the testimony of Esther and many other YIVO autobiographers that for this generation reading performed precisely the opposite function. As she writes further on in her autobiography, Esther finds a surrogate mother in nature, a surrogate friend and confidante in her diary, and her links with family and community are increasingly attenuated as she becomes ever more absorbed in books.

This process is corroborated by the testimony of the autobiographer we know as “A. Greyno,” a twenty-three-year-old member of the urban working class. His early youth is characterized by bouts of juvenile delinquency on the streets alternating with backbreaking work at the sewing machine in his parents’ home, which doubled as their workshop:

After working several weeks in a row without a break until bedtime, I managed to convince my mother to give me money to become a member

of the town’s Tarbut library. I would sit up until very late at night by the oil-lamp, immersed in completely different, new worlds, unaware of the hours flying by, until I went to bed with a loving kiss to the pages of my book. I felt as if I had acquired a fresh, brand-new skin, and, without feeling any physical fatigue, I fell asleep with a smile of intellectual satisfaction on my face. . . . One by one, I broke with all of my friends. They seemed to me to be too common and ignorant. My life began to become monotonous. After a day of work at the sewing machine, I would slip quietly, like a shadow, into the library with a book tucked inside my jacket, then I’d read and read almost the entire night.

Perez terms the library described in his memoirs as “their *beys-medresh*”—that is, it served young rebels such as himself as the secular equivalent of the traditional Jewish study-house.<sup>50</sup> In the YIVO autobiographies the library similarly emerges as a cultural institution of central importance. Many of the local headquarters of the various political youth movements made it a high priority to establish their own libraries of books in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish. Noting that few young Jews could afford to buy books of their own, Kligsberg characterizes these libraries as being among the most important communal institutions for Jewish youth living in small towns. He cites one YIVO autobiography contestant from Ostryna, a town with a community of about 1,000 Jews in the 1930s: “There are several people in our town, whose formal education consisted of little more than the *kheyder*, and yet they are quite cultivated and enlightened, all thanks to the library. . . . Here is their university, here is their inexhaustible source of knowledge. *The library has a holding of two thousand volumes.*”<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, it is clear from many of the YIVO autobiographies that the initial appeal of youth movements was often not so much ideological as it was motivated by a hunger for culture, especially for literature.<sup>52</sup> The youth movements’ libraries not only supplied readers with books but served as sites of communal interaction. Here young people met friends and comrades, discussed what they were reading, worked together on political projects, wrote for organizational publications, and prepared literary evenings and amateur theatricals.<sup>53</sup>

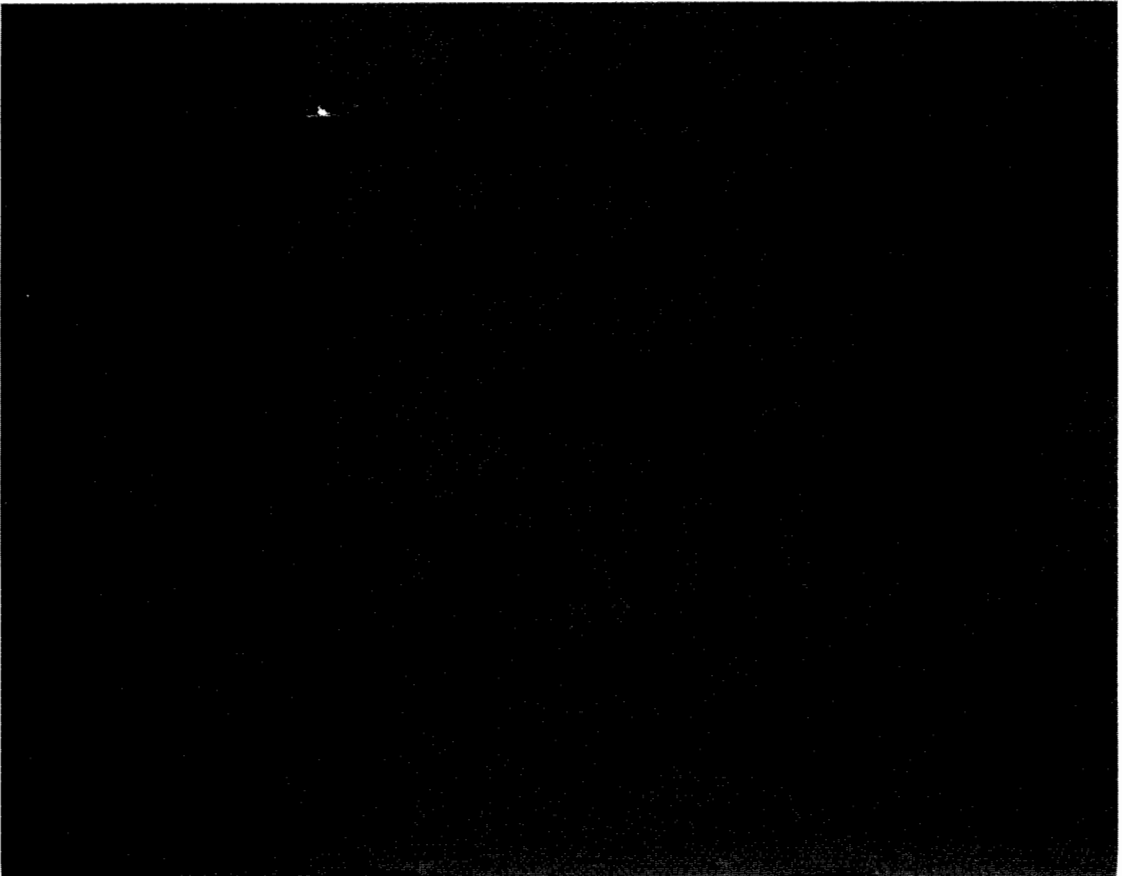
Among the new modes of behavior associated with youth movements, Kligsberg highlights the significance of walking, either in small groups or in pairs. These walks were also of a decisively literary character, combining a heightened appreciation of nature with the discussion of literature. As described in several autobiographies in this volume, such walks manifest the belated romanticism characteristic of this generation of young Jews. But whereas Rousseau and Goethe’s Werther, their literary role models, were

solitary walkers, walking provided these generally more sociable Jewish romantics with a shared intimacy: "Books were an especially beloved topic on these walks," Kligsberg notes. "For around such topics more open expression was given to personal, intimate moments, since every individual had his favorite literary heroes, with whom he would identify."<sup>54</sup>

Kligsberg thus suggests a direct connection between the reading and discussing of literature, of whatever genre, and the dawning of individualistic self-awareness through identification with literary "heroes." Moreover, this identification fostered the capacity to voice aspects of the inner life that, without the mediation of literature, would not and could not have come to light. In other words, the library and the political organization played no small role in teaching Jewish youth to think, speak, and write *autobiographically*.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, YIVO's records indicate that, following announcements of its autobiography competitions, several youth movements held discussions on the topic of "how to write one's life story." Given the intense intellectual atmosphere of these institutions and the consuming desire of Jewish youth in this period for self-actualization—or, as Kligsberg puts it, for "the consciousness that *you were something in and of yourself* (something, that is, that stood out from the collective)"<sup>56</sup>—such discussions were likely to have been fairly widespread and passionate.

Another striking feature that emerges from these autobiographies is the high proportion of these young Jews whose reading leads directly to writing.<sup>57</sup> An extraordinarily large number of the YIVO autobiographers mentioned (and sometimes submitted) personal journals and offered accounts of their first experiments in poetry and prose. Many incorporated examples of their youthful literary efforts within their autobiographies (see, for example, the life history in this volume by the author we know as "EM.TEPA"). The autobiography by twenty-year-old Ludwik Stöckel included an appendix of forty-two pages of poems and other annotations that were indexed to his lengthy life history. "Esther" reports that by the age of nineteen she had already written two novels, numerous poems, and a play that she staged on her own. Or consider the example of "J. Harefuler," nicknamed "Jakub the Poet" by his comrades, who describes writing his first poem—an introspective work inspired, perhaps, by the profound impression made on him by reading *Robinson Crusoe*:<sup>58</sup>

All these ideas, linked by my feelings and my vivid imagination, became literary material. The first poem I wrote during this period was inspired by my sad fate as a recluse. In this poem I depicted a young man alone on the open sea. . . . In the endless sea, I depicted life, and in the young man, myself. I gave it the title "Alone among the Waves."



Cover of "My Biography" by N. Drori, 1934.

The degree to which these young autobiographers internalized literary models and then held them up as a mirror—however much it offered an altered image of the self—is illustrated with remarkable emotional nuance in the autobiography of a seventeen-year-old who signs her text “Hanzi.” The all-but-abandoned daughter of a pious mother and a heretical, unfaithful father, she goes about hungry, unwashed, dressed in filthy rags. Practically blind in one eye, she also suffers from a chronic skin disease and a crippling leg infection. Reading—whether chapters of the Bible or the latest works of Hebrew literature—emerges repeatedly as her most constant source of comfort and inspiration, eventually becoming a powerfully self-reflective act:

In my reading I lingered increasingly over the descriptions of the heroes. The authors would describe the details of their external appearance and, in particular, their eyes, which were so expressive. Their eyes, their eyes! What were their eyes to them or to me? At such moments I felt a terrible contempt for myself and for everything around me, and in the mirror I saw my misfortune—ah!

This internalization of literary experience can even be inferred from those autobiographers who go out of their way to stress the *non-literary* nature of their life histories. Eighteen-year-old “Eter” begins her autobiography by stating: “Although what I am writing is not in the least like a novel, I will start with a prologue.” And she concludes her life history with a highly literary epilogue: “All day long the same thought pounds inside my head. . . . Many times a day, I recite to myself Julian Tuwim’s poem ‘If Only . . .’ I call it ‘Hope’”—and she cites the poem in its entirety.

If one book spoke more directly than any other to the minds and hearts of the YIVO autobiographers it was *Jean Christophe*, French novelist Romain Rolland’s monumental *Bildungsroman*, published between 1904 and 1912 (a book, it should be noted, that teems with Jewish motifs and characters, from Biblical figures to Dreyfusards). No other literary work is mentioned with greater frequency in these autobiographies. For many of these young men and women, reading *Jean Christophe* constituted a revelation.<sup>59</sup> Paeans to the novel and to Rolland appear frequently, such as the following, written in 1934 by a twenty-year-old living in Łódź at the conclusion of his autobiography: “I read the ten volumes; it took me three whole months. Finally I looked at the last pages and thought: ‘Is this already the end? Let us honor and respect people who have great hearts! I feel like shouting, ‘Long live Romain Rolland!’” Another autobiographer, “J. Harefuler,” even follows Rolland in titling a section of his account “Youth.”

Employing such obviously literary models for the recasting of one’s life history into narrative might be seen as compromising the veracity of these documents. Indeed, YIVO warned contestants against “telling] fairy tales.”<sup>60</sup> Such suspicion even appears to have crossed the minds of some of the autobiographers themselves. A similar equivocation may be discerned in the aforementioned twenty-year-old autobiographer’s discussion of *Jean Christophe*: “Romain Rolland is faithful to reality. But to what extent is his reality ours? Ours is ugly and rotten. . . .”<sup>61</sup> Clearly, it would have been difficult *not* to perceive the glaring disparity between the world of which Rolland writes and the reality of impoverishment and persecution that pervaded Jewish life in interwar Poland. Yet it was precisely the consciousness of this disparity, gleaned through reading, that served this autobiographer as a catalyst for subjecting the self to scrutiny. These documents cast into cruel relief the painful contrast between the high cultural aspirations of the majority of the contestants and the degradation of their material existence. Indeed, the autobiographers vent their most ardent protests against the incompatibility of literature and life—doing so, of necessity, in literary rhetoric. For example, this highly stylized and “poetic” plaint by the young woman known to us as “Forget-me-not”:

What does life mean? Can I use this beautiful word to describe the hard and thorny road that I’ve traveled? Why is my life a long chain of suffering and struggle, an endless struggle to survive? For the first time I asked: Where is my home, my childhood, my youth, about which poets write so much?

Remarkably, Weinreich insisted that “with respect to the *great majority* of participants in our competition, the assertion is surely correct: The material that they sent is for them absolutely not literature, but *life*.”<sup>62</sup> Weinreich sought “scientific” approaches to the study of Jewish youth through their autobiographies and other personal writings, working with the prevailing scholarly assumption that “artistic truth” and “scientific truth” are inherently incompatible. Given that he himself was an accomplished literary scholar,<sup>63</sup> the almost total absence of literary considerations in *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt* is all the more surprising. Indeed, when Weinreich does address the literary character of these documents his tone is defensive, even apologetic:

[T]here is also a group of participants with *writerly* ambitions. The word “ambitions” should by no means be construed as pejorative. . . . There is a school of thought that maintains that autobiographers who have literary inclinations import specific defects into their documents. . . . Be

that as it may, we must emphasize that these “young lions,” literary prodigies, constitute an extreme minority among the writers of the autobiographies in the YIVO collections.<sup>64</sup>

In his discussion of “Lies” in an Autobiography,” Weinreich praises the social scientific value of the autobiography of “Vladek,” published by Thomas and Znaniecki in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, precisely because the author’s limited education spared him from “excessive ‘waxing literary.’” Weinreich calls attention to the problems this tendency poses for scholars analyzing autobiographies:

The metaphor and image take pride of place, thus eclipsing the content of what is depicted. What is worse, these metaphors and images are not infrequently *borrowed*, adopted ready-made; these writers confirm the maxim of Henryk Sienkiewicz, that on occasion it is not the head that guides the pen, but the pen that guides the head.<sup>65</sup>

But how can one conceive of any form of written document, autobiographical or otherwise, that does not “borrow” from a shared discourse of metaphors, analogies, images, and so on? Importing literary models, apparent to a greater or lesser degree in all of the YIVO autobiographies, was essential not only for writing these documents, but for the sense of self that existed prior to taking the pen in hand. As Philippe Lejeune observes, “The autobiographer could not realize himself other than by imitating people who imagined what it was like to be an autobiographer.”<sup>66</sup>

In addition to their often copious reading and youthful literary endeavors, there were, of course, other influences at work on the personal narratives that YIVO’s young autobiographers fashioned during the 1930s. Following the institute’s suggestion that they organize their texts chronologically, many begin with their own earliest memories. Others, however, start with stories about their birth and infancy that are clearly the product of family lore rather than personal recollection. And, despite YIVO’s admonition that “the contest requires an autobiography, not an editorial,” some authors occasionally lapse into diatribes that reflect their political indoctrination. While Weinreich and his colleagues in Vilna might well have seen these, too, as problematic “borrowings,” they provide the reader of these deeply personal texts with an unrivaled glimpse into the full range of influences—literary, pedagogical, psychological, political, experiential—that forged these adolescents’ emerging sense of self.

Indeed, we approach these autobiographies today quite differently than did their original audience of YIVO scholars. They sought to strengthen the future of Polish Jewry; we are interested in understanding its recent past. Their scholarly agenda was shaped by social science disciplines, especially psychology and sociology; our approach also includes the interests of historians, literary scholars, and folklorists. Our approach to these autobiographies is also distinguished by the fact that their authors were among the very first to write about their generation. Their life histories have since joined an extensive corpus of literary works, histories, and communal and personal testimonies about East European Jewish life before World War II. During the final decades of the twentieth century, personal documents of this generation attained an unprecedented prominence, as Holocaust survivors began to offer public testimonies of their prewar and wartime experiences. In fact, many Holocaust survivors alive today could have entered YIVO’s contests. But it is hard to imagine how their experiences as adolescents in the 1930s could ever be recaptured now, so overshadowed are those years by the tragedy of the Holocaust. Through these autobiographies, we can discover the wide range of young Jews’ experience in that fervid time and place as described in their own words, as they were coming of age. In ways unforeseen by these young authors and the scholars who encouraged them to write, we glimpse an exceptional generation as they arrive at the threshold of adulthood. Most would not live to cross that threshold, and those who survived the Holocaust went on to lead lives markedly different from their prewar existence. In this sense, these adolescents and their personal histories epitomize Jewish life in Poland’s interwar period in its sudden newness and its great anxieties as well as its great hopes.

## Notes

- 1 Announcement for YIVO autobiography contest, flier: English version [Vilna, 1938], unpaginated.
- 2 On Jewish life in interwar Poland, see Hirszt Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II*, trans. Eva Zeitlin Dobkin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999); Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* (New York: Schocken, 1984); Lucjan Dobroszycki and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland before the Holocaust* (New York: Schocken, 1994); Joshua A. Fishman, ed., *Studies of Polish Jewry 1919–1939: The Interplay of Social, Economic and Political Factors in the Struggle of a Minority for Its Existence* [Yiddish and English] (New York: YIVO, 1974); Celia Stopnicka Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland between the Two World Wars* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994); Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, eds., *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (New York:

- Schocken, 1983); Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).
- 3 The tension between objective description and retroactive romanticization is itself a centuries-old phenomenon in the historiography of Polish Jewry. In the late seventeenth century, Nathan Hannover, the most important Jewish chronicler of the devastation wreaked on Polish Jews during the Chmielnicki Uprising of 1648, added an appendix to his account that lionized the purity and righteousness of the communities that were destroyed. Similarly, after extensive destruction of East European Jewish life and culture during World War I, the Russian and Ukrainian civil wars, and the Soviet-Polish War, fiction writers, memoirists, and sermonizers immortalized the *shtetl* (i.e., the East European small town where the majority of Polish Jews once lived) as “a world that is no more.” These literary re-creations, however stylistically brilliant and psychologically compelling, are extremely problematic in terms of historical accuracy, and their influence on the “collective memory” of East European Jewry has been extensive. For a further discussion of the *shtetl* as a subject of Jewish literature, see the introduction to Ruth R. Wisse, ed., *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas* (New York: Behrman House, 1983). For a related analysis of the *shtetl* as a paradigm in a landmark work of post-World War II American anthropology on East European Jewry, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s introduction to Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken, 1995 [1952]).
  - 4 A concise history of YIVO appears in *Guide to the YIVO Archives*, eds. Fruma Mohrter and Marek Web (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. xi–xxii; a lively description of the Vilna YIVO during the year before the start of World War II appears in Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time: A Memoir, 1938–1947* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989); see pp. 77–100. On diaspora nationalism, see Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 18–19.
  - 5 The only groups that do not seem to be represented in the contests are the most highly polonized of Polish Jews—who had ceased to regard themselves as Jews in any meaningful way, and therefore would have little, if any, reason to contribute to a Jewish autobiography contest—and, on the other extreme, those yeshiva students who would have considered the very act of participating in such a contest to be heretical.
  - 6 YIVO Archives, Record Group 4, Autobiography 3770, p. 1; translator: Daniel Soyfer.
  - 7 It should be noted, though, that descriptions of poverty and child abuse are a mainstay of *Haskalah* fiction and memoir. This similarity might reflect a parallel sense of social and cultural self-consciousness on the part of young writers during periods of cultural upheaval, or it might indicate that the writers of the YIVO autobiographies were addressing in their own life histories issues raised in works they were reading by Jewish writers of a previous generation.
  - 8 Maks Vaynraykh, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt: yesoydes, metoch, problemen fun yidisher yugnt-forschung* [The Way to Our Youth: Foundations, Methods, and Problems of Jewish Youth Research] (Vilna: YIVO, 1935), p. 12.
  - 9 See Philip Lee Utley, *Siegfried Bernfeld: Left-wing Youth Leader, Psychoanalyst, and Zionist, 1910–April, 1918*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1975. Utley notes (p. 5) that the German term *Jugend* corresponds neither to “youth” nor to “adolescence,” but rather to a broader period, from the ages of fourteen to twenty-one.
  - 10 See Peter Dudek, *Jugend als Objekt der Wissenschaften: Geschichte der Jugendforschung in Deutschland und Österreich* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990).
  - 11 “YIVO’s Youth Research (*Yugfor*)” [Yiddish], *Yedies fun YIVO* 4–5 (45–46), April–May 1934, pp. 1–3.
  - 12 On Weinreich’s studies with Sapir, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Coming of Age in the Thirties: Max Weinreich, Edward Sapir, and Jewish Social Science,” *YIVO Annual* 23 (1996): pp. 1–104.
  - 13 See Siegfried Bernfeld, “Types of Adolescence,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 7 (1938): pp. 243–53.
  - 14 A follower of Gustav Wyneken, Bernfeld had been active in German Jewish youth movements and shared with Wyneken the utopian view that youth was not just a transition or developmental stage, but a distinctive formation. See Siegfried Bernfeld, “Ein Institut für Psychologie und Soziologie der Jugend. (Archiv für Jugendkultur). Entwurf zu einem Programm,” *Annalen der Natur- und Kulturphilosophie* 13, Wilhelm Ostwald and Rudolf Goldscheid, eds. (Leipzig: Verlag Unesma G.M.B.H., 1917): pp. 217–51. See also Siegfried Bernfeld, *Das jüdische Volk und sein Jugend* (Berlin, Vienna, Leipzig: R. Loewit Verlag, 1919).
  - 15 By the time Weinreich met with him in Vienna in 1934, Bernfeld was no longer working on Jewish youth research and agreed to turn his archives over to YIVO. Two years later Weinreich began publishing his Yiddish translation of Freud’s *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse* (*Arayvrih in psikhoanaliz*, published by YIVO in three parts in 1936, 1937, 1938; this was about half of what Weinreich projected to translate and publish of Freud’s work). Freud accepted Weinreich’s invitation to join YIVO’s *Kuratorium* (honorary board of trustees) in 1930.
  - 16 This was easier said than done, given the differences in American and European disciplinary formations. The interdisciplinary social science that Weinreich had encountered in the United States, which depended heavily on American anthropology, could not be transferred wholesale to Europe, just as *Jugendforschung* had no precise analog in the United States, Stanley Hall’s child study movement notwithstanding. See G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence and Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton, 1904.) Though Hall, who was trained in experimental psychology, was sympathetic to psychoanalysis, his evolutionary views (ontology recapitulates phylogeny) and biological determinism stood in sharp contrast to Weinreich’s approach.
  - 17 “An Appeal to the Jews of America” from the Friends of the Yiddish Scientific Institute [1930], YIVO Archives, Record Group 100, Sapir/Weinreich correspondence, YIVO New York, series: Amopteyl (American Branch).
  - 18 “It [YIVO] is making researches into the peculiarities of the psyche of the Jewish child” (“An Appeal to the Jews of America” from the Friends of the Yiddish Scientific Institute [1930]). Also, “development of the Jewish child” is identified as a research topic in Nahum Shif et al., *Di organizatsye fun der yidisher vistshaft* [The Organization of Jewish Research] (Vilna: Tsentraler Bildungs Komitet / Vilner Bildungs Gezelschaft, 1925), p. 39.
  - 19 For an announcement of this contest, see *Yedies fun YIVO* 3 (38), May 1932, n.p. *Yedies fun YIVO* 2 (41), March 1933, p. 7, reports thirty-four entrants. Elsewhere, thirty-five are reported.
  - 20 In addition to Poland, which provided the great majority of entries, YIVO received autobiographies from Austria (nine entries), Latvia (eight), Palestine (seven), Romania (six), Germany (four), Czechoslovakia (three), and one each from Hungary, France, Syria, United States, and South America.
  - 21 YIVO Archives, Record Group 4, folder 3887, document no. 151019.
  - 22 YIVO attempted to reach as many Jewish communities as possible through its own network of Friends of YIVO, including Jews in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia; Finland, Sweden, and Denmark; France, England, and Switzerland; Romania, Czechoslovakia,



- Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria; United States and Canada; Argentina, Peru, Chile, and Mexico; Australia and South Africa; and Palestine. The call for submissions went out in several languages, and YIVO requested that the announcement be translated into other languages.
- 23 "Ershter proyekt far a gliderung fun der yugnt-forshung" (YIVO Archives, Record Group 4, folder 3880, document no. 150751) indicates that the researchers supplemented a selection of about six autobiographies by talking with the authors, their parents, friends, and others, as well as by family correspondence. The researchers also collected magazines, literature, letters, poetry, and diaries, including diaries that were specially commissioned.
- 24 Eileen Markley Znaniecka, "Current Sociology in Poland," *American Sociological Review* 2, no. 1-6 (1937): p. 422.
- 25 Eileen Markley Znaniecka, "Eastern European Sociology: A Polish Sociology," in *Twentieth Century Sociology*, George Gurwitsch and Wilbert Ellis Moore, eds. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), pp. 703-17.
- 26 William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (New York: Knopf, 1927), vol. 2, p. 1831.
- 27 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 1832.
- 28 Max Weinreich, "Culture and Personality among the Eastern Jews and Their Relation to the General Problems of Social Science" [proposal: typescript], May 1933, document no. 171A, p. 5.
- 29 "Yugntforshung (yugfor) fun Yivo," *Yedies fun YIVO* 1-3 (42-44), January-March 1934, p. 5.
- 30 Announcement for YIVO autobiography contest, flier: English version [Vienna, 1938], unpaginated.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 "Competition for the Best Autobiography of a Jewish Youth" [Yiddish], *Yedies fun YIVO* 1-3 (42-44), January-March 1934, p. 6.
- 33 YIVO continued to receive submissions to the last youth autobiography contest as late as March 1940; see [list kept by Khana Pitchatcher-Man], YIVO Archives, Record Group 4, folder 3879, document no. 150741.
- 34 Announcement for YIVO autobiography contest, flier: English version [Vienna, 1938], unpaginated.
- 35 Vaynraykh, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt*, pp. 19-21; on the discussion of the volume's central theme, see p. 192. Although no definitive study of the autobiographies ever appeared, sociologist Moshe (Moses) Kligsberg provided content analyses in several studies: Moses Kligsberg, "Socio-psychological Problems Reflected in the YIVO Autobiography Contests," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 1 (1946): pp. 242-59; Moses Kligsberg, "Child and Adolescent Behavior under Stress: An Analytical Guide to a Collection of Autobiographies of Jewish Young Men and Women in Poland (1932-1939) . . ." [report] (New York: YIVO, 1965); Moshe Kligsberg, "The Jewish Youth Movement in Interwar Poland: (A Sociological Study)" [Yiddish], in *Studies of Polish Jewry 1919-1939*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman (New York: YIVO, 1974), pp. 137-228. Kligsberg's earliest work on the autobiographies appears to be two reports prepared for Max Weinreich, dated 1940; see YIVO Archives, Record Group 4, folder 3876 alef, document no. 150663 alef.
- 36 Weinreich acknowledged in 1934 that "Never was the situation of youth as complicated as it is today." The following year, in *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt*, he mentions how Jews in Germany, Austria, and Hungary, among other places, were losing their jobs because of Hitler's Aryan policies. Unemployed youth were prime candidates for revolutionary movements and emigration.
- 37 Materials related to the YIVO youth autobiography contests recently recovered from Vienna and sent to YIVO's headquarters in New York include contest correspondence, some thirty-nine additional complete autobiographies, as well as interviews, diaries, fragments of autobiographies and other related items. On the history of YIVO's collections during and after World War II, see David E. Fishman, "Embers Plucked from the Fire: The Rescue of Jewish Cultural Treasures in Vienna" [pamphlet] (New York: YIVO, 1996).
- 38 See Daniel Soyfer, "Documenting Immigrant Lives at an Immigrant Institution: YIVO's Autobiography Contest of 1942," *Jewish Social Studies* 5, no. 3 (spring/summer 1999): pp. 218-43. An extended selection from one of these autobiographies, written by Israel Pressman, appears in English translation as "Roads That Passed: Russia, My Old Home," *YIVO Annual* 22 (1995): pp. 1-80.
- 39 Maks Vaynraykh, "YIVO during a year of destruction" [Yiddish], *YIVO-bleter* 21, no. 1 (January-February 1942): p. 98.
- 40 "In memoriam" [Yiddish], *YIVO-bleter* 26 (July-December 1945): p. 3.
- 41 See Marcus Moseley, *Jewish Autobiography in Eastern Europe*, Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1990, esp. pp. 49-84.
- 42 See Philippe Lejeune, *L'autobiographie en France* (Paris: A. Colin, 1971), pp. 63-66.
- 43 On the emergence of modern Yiddish and Hebrew novels in mid-nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken, 1973); Israel Ginzburg, *A History of Jewish Literature: Haskalah at Its Zenith*, trans. Bernard Martin (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press/New York: Ktav, 1978); Israel Ginzburg, *A History of Jewish Literature: The Haskalah Movement in Russia*, trans. Bernard Martin (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press/New York: Ktav, 1978).
- 44 *The IL Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth Wisse (New York: Schocken, 1990), pp. 344-45.
- 45 The same Bresler's library, located on Nowolipki Street, was to provide the Yiddish writers Israel Joshua Singer and Isaac Bashevis Singer, two brothers of similar background to the author of this autobiography, with their first acquaintance with secular literature. See Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 26-29.
- 46 YIVO Archives, Record Group 4, Autobiography 3752, pp. 10-13, passim; translator: Elinor Robinson.
- 47 Kligsberg, "The Jewish Youth Movement in Interwar Poland," p. 169. According to Kligsberg, the largest category of books read was belletristic.
- 48 See Philippe Lejeune, *Le moi des demoielles: enquête sur le journal de jeune fille* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993), passim.
- 49 See Vaynraykh, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt*, pp. 149-61.
- 50 *The IL Peretz Reader*, p. 343.
- 51 Kligsberg, "The Jewish Youth Movement in Interwar Poland," p. 165. Emphasis in original.
- 52 Compare Ezra Mendelsohn's appraisal of the YIVO autobiographies in his *Zionism in Poland: The Formative Years, 1915-1926* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 338-44.
- 53 See Kligsberg, "The Jewish Youth Movement in Interwar Poland," p. 174.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

- 55 One could argue that in this regard these institutions performed a function somewhat akin to the contemporary “autobiographical workshop.” See Philippe Lejeune, “Teaching People to Write their own Life Story,” in his *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 216–32.
- 56 Kligsberg, “The Jewish Youth Movement in Interwar Poland,” p. 174.
- 57 See *ibid.*, p. 171.
- 58 On the role of *Robinson Crusoe* in fostering autobiographical consciousness, see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 89–92.
- 59 The universal appeal of *Jean Christophe* for adolescents of this generation is attested to by none other than Jean-Paul Sartre, who recalls the intoxicating effect the novel had upon him as a twenty-year-old. See Sartre, *The War Diaries (November 1939/March 1940)*, trans. Quintin Hoare (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 73.
- 60 Announcement for YIVO autobiography contest, flier: English version [Vilna, 1938], unpaginated.
- 61 YIVO Archives, Record Group 4, Autobiography 3701, pp. 44–45; translator: Elinor Robinson.
- 62 Vaynraykh, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt*, p. 140, emphasis in original.
- 63 See, for example, Maks Vaynraykh, *Bilder fun der yidisheh literaturgeshikhte fun di onheybn biz Mendele Moykher-sforim* [Moments from the History of Yiddish Literature from its Beginnings to Mendele Mokher Seforim] (Vilna: Tomer Press, 1928).
- 64 Vaynraykh, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt*, pp. 140–42, emphasis in original. Note that, in contrast to much of American culture, “ambition” and “ambitious” were, until very recently, highly pejorative terms in European high culture.
- 65 Vaynraykh, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt*, p. 145. Weinreich’s equivocations concerning the literary aspect of these documents is evinced in his own Yiddish coinage of the term *literatureven*, “to wax literary.” In his usage, the term carries a somewhat pejorative accent.
- 66 Lejeune, *L'autobiographie en France*, p. 47. The YIVO autobiographies are by no means the sole example of this close interdependency of life and literature in autobiographical writing. Consider, for instance, the personal history of Richard Wright, another member of a disadvantaged minority writing in the middle decades of the twentieth century, who describes the effort to compose his autobiography as an effort “to try to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world that was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal. I would hurl words into the darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.” (*Black Boy [American Hunger]*, [New York: Harper Perennial, 1993], p. 452.)