Introduction

At first glance Aron Mark might seem to have been little more than a teacher in a provincial Polish city, yet his career was typical of a certain type of Jewish intellectual in interwar Eastern Europe. Born in Łomża in 1904, he attended both a traditional yeshiva and a Polish gymnasium before studying Slavic language and literature at the University of Warsaw. While teaching in the Yiddish secular schools he was also active in the Jewish labor movement. He began writing for the Yiddish press while still a student and went on to publish poetry and short fiction. His book-length works include annotated editions of the Yiddish writers I. L. Peretz and Sholem Asch, a Polish-Yiddish dictionary, and Yiddish translations of writers such as Romain Roland and Knut Hamson. He eventually became a literature instructor in Vilna's Real-gimnazye (academic high school for the sciences), the leading institution of the Yiddish school network.

In many ways Mark was ideally situated to appreciate the work of YIVO, the center for Yiddish scholarship founded in 1925. He came of age in the period after World War I, when Jews looked forward hopefully to the possibilities accorded them in the newly revived Polish state. An eclectic education familiarized him with both traditional Jewish texts and European culture. He lived in the *kresy* [borderlands] of Eastern Poland, where enthusiasm for YIVO was strongest, and was involved in the Yiddish schools, also a bastion of YIVO's support. A connoisseur of Yiddish literature and himself a Yiddish writer – and thus both a consumer and producer of serious Yiddish culture – he was just the audience that the institute's leaders envisioned for their publications. As a pedagogue he was also perfectly poised to convey the fruits of YIVO's scholarship to a broader audience of young Jewish students, the first to receive a systematic education in their mother tongue. Finally, his translation work suggests that he shared YIVO's goal of making world culture accessible to Jews in their own language. Yet if Mark's support for the institute was typical of those of his generation and career path, his level of devotion was extraordinary: when he and his wife welcomed their first child they named him Yivo Mark.[1]

This book examines the history of Yiddish scholarship and specifically that of its foremost exponent, the Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut [Yiddish Scientific Institute], known by its Yiddish acronym YIVO and today in English as the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. From its origins among a group of East European émigrés in Berlin in 1924 to the establishment of its headquarters in Vilna (then Wilno, Poland, and now Vilnius, Lithuania) until the outbreak of World War II, YIVO pioneered the study of Yiddish-speaking Jewry as well as the use of Yiddish for scholarly research. As the most authoritative body for Yiddish, YIVO set out to raise that language from a spoken vernacular to a modern tongue of high culture. As a central gathering point for Jewish scholars, it provided a haven where they could carry out their research, disseminated their findings, and trained a young generation of researchers and teachers. Moreover, as the preeminent institution of Yiddish culture YIVO played a central role in both modern Jewish scholarship and Jewish national identity in the Diaspora.

Despite its modest size and specialized work, YIVO loomed large in the landscape of Jewish Eastern Europe and inspired tremendous loyalty. Writers celebrated it in verse[2] and regularly described it in superlative terms as "a palace, a temple, a tower that will light far, far around it," and "the symbol and ornament of our highest cultural achievements in the entire world."[3] Its significance also went beyond the realm of culture to take on political resonance. It served "the dispersed Jewish people," supporters claimed, "instead of a government."[4] Nor was it only a handful of scholars and intellectuals who shared such sentiments. While its strongest support was in Eastern Europe, YIVO boasted a global network of members in Yiddish-speaking communities from North America to South Africa. Many were ordinary, often extremely poor Jews like a correspondent from Piosk, Poland, who wrote, "With joy I proclaim myself a porter of clay, sand, and brick for the palace of the people called the Yiddish Scientific Institute."[5] Such supporters went to great lengths to contribute to YIVO's work, both financially and by gathering the books, artifacts, and data that still today comprise the world's leading research collection on East European Jewry and Yiddish culture.

What inspired this dedication? What led thousands of Jews around the world to care so deeply about a body devoted to such seemingly rarified matters as Yiddish grammar? And how did they come to see this small academic institution as a substitute for national sovereignty? To answer these questions, we must consider that YIVO served not only as a research center but also as the flagship institution of Diaspora Nationalism, a movement that fought for the rights of Jews as a minority within their countries of residence. In these dual roles YIVO produced work for an elite audience of scholars while stressing its ties to the *folk*, the masses of Yiddish-speaking Jews. It was thus enmeshed in constant battles over how closely to involve itself in raging debates over Hebraism versus Yiddishism and socialism versus *klal-yisroel politik* [Jewish political solidarity]. And while YIVO's headquarters served as the crown jewel

of the renowned cultural institutions of interwar Vilna, it was also the center of a transnational Diasporic movement whose supporters struggled over the role of place for a stateless, widely dispersed nation. It was this vision that inspired individuals such as Aron Mark, who devoted their lives to building Yiddish culture: that a scattered people, divided by fractured religious, linguistic, and political allegiances, could use scholarship as a means to construct a modern identity.

Language and Nation

At the time YIVO was founded in 1925 Yiddish was the native language of approximately 11 million people – roughly three-quarters of the world's Jewish population – and was nearly one thousand years old.[6] As the vernacular of European Jewry it had traditionally been spoken by all but considered unsuitable for serious works of scholarship and philosophy, its literature denigrated as the domain of women and the uneducated masses. High-culture functions were reserved for the sacred tongue, Hebrew, the province of a learned and almost exclusively male elite, while knowledge of non–Jewish languages was extremely limited.[7] In the late eighteenth century the *Haskalah* [Jewish Enlightenment movement] brought about a fundamental shift, as *maskilim* [adherents of Haskalah] advocated the modernization of Jewish society and a rapprochement with European culture. These reformers considered Yiddish not a language in its own right but as *zshargon* [jargon], a corrupt form of German. They encouraged their fellow Jews to abandon the tongue, which they derided as a sign of ignorance of and isolation from European culture, in favor of the language of the non–Jewish majority. Indeed, in the course of the nineteenth century most West European Jews ceased to use the Jewish vernacular. Yet in Eastern Europe, instead of simply abandoning Yiddish Jews transformed it into the vehicle of a modern culture and the touchstone of a new, secular identity.[8]

Ironically, the maskilim themselves set this process in motion with their realization that only in Yiddish could they make their ideas known to the vast majority of Jews who were fluent neither in Hebrew nor in European tongues. By the 1860s popular publications designed to spread the message of Haskalah led to the first modern literary works in Yiddish. Similarly, as radical political movements developed in Eastern Europe their leaders recognized that to build a mass following they would have to address the Jewish working class in the only language it understood. By the 1890s Jewish socialists had turned to propaganda in Yiddish to garner support despite their own stated goal of ultimately assimilating into the worldwide proletariat.

As nationalism grew in nineteenth-century Europe and the maskilim's goal of full integration proved elusive, some – particularly in the East – rejected the traditional conception of Jewishness based in religion in favor of a secular definition of Jews as a national group. In this they followed a larger trend toward growing national consciousness among the many ethnic minorities of Central

and Eastern Europe. These groups drew on a tradition of romantic nationalism originating with the German thinker Johann Gottfried von Herder, who lauded the common people, the *Volk*, for preserving traditional folkways untainted by modernization. In his view the Volk was the most authentic bearer of an ethnic group's character, and thus he valued vernacular traditions as the most authentic expression of the *Volksgeist* [national spirit].[9]

Language played a central role in this conception of nationalism as a concrete, daily expression of a group's unique culture. The so-called small peoples of the region began to see their local tongues not as mere dialects or shameful "jargons" but as badges of national distinctiveness. By the late nineteenth century many had turned to researching their own vernacular languages, as well as folklore and history, as a means of building collective identity. By deeming their cultures a worthy object of study, they hoped to promote their groups' sense of importance and self-respect. Moreover, as the subject peoples of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires developed aspirations to national independence, these movements took on direct political implications. Leaders of groups such as the Czechs and Ukrainians sought to demonstrate that their peoples possessed their own unique traditions that distinguished them from their neighbors and rulers. In linguistic terms, they argued against those who disparaged their vernaculars as merely variants of more established tongues. These cultural distinctions lent weight to political claims: those who saw Ukrainian, for example, as a dialect of Russian often believed that its speakers rightly found their home within the Russian Empire. Those who argued that it was a separate tongue usually believed that Ukrainians constituted a distinct nationality deserving its own state, with Ukrainian as its national language.[10]

When Jews adopted such ideas they faced a unique dilemma: European Jewry possessed not one but two languages of its own. Thus a myriad of national movements developed to compete for the allegiance of the Jewish masses. Most scholars have focused their attention on Zionism, which advocated a Jewish homeland in Palestine and the revival of Hebrew as its spoken tongue.[11] Zionists' ultimate success in creating a Jewish state has often overshadowed the work of Diaspora Nationalists, who shared Zionism's definition of the Jews in secular, nationalist terms but advocated building Jewish life in the lands of their residence and a modern culture in the Yiddish language. The movement's leading theoretician, Simon Dubnow, promoted a program of national cultural autonomy, whereby governments would recognize the rights of all national minorities – including Jews – to educational and cultural work in their own languages. Dubnow saw statelessness in positive terms, as a higher stage of national development, but believed that legal guarantees were needed for minorities to flourish in the Diaspora.[12] This principle became a cornerstone of the platforms of political parties such as the liberal Folkspartey [People's Party], which Dubnow cofounded, and the socialist Jewish Labor Bund.

Yiddishists such as Chaim Zhitlowsky went one step further, viewing the language itself as the basis of Jewish identity. For Zhitlowsky support for

Yiddish was tied to the socialist principles that led him to defend the Jewish working class and its culture. Paradoxically, Zhitlowsky's concern for the common people spurred his advocacy of elite literature in Yiddish, including philosophical and scholarly writing as well as translations of classics from other languages. He sought to develop the tongue into a suitable medium for all topics and forms of expression, for only in this way, he argued, could ordinary Jews have access to world culture and all Jews live a fully Jewish life without the need to turn to "foreign" sources. And only in this way could they raise the status of their national language and, by implication, of themselves as a national group.[13]

The founders, scholars, and supporters of YIVO saw their work as the culmination of this effort to elevate Yiddish from a lowly "jargon" to a modern language, the equal of any European tongue and a fitting vehicle for a sophisticated high culture. They thus set out to radically remake the distinctions between high and low in Jewish life. By undertaking such seemingly arcane tasks as standardizing Yiddish spelling and documenting variants of Yiddish folk songs, they were not only winning respect for the language itself; they were fighting for the dignity of millions of ordinary Yiddish-speaking Jews.

As World War I drew to a close the prospects for realizing this dream had never seemed brighter. As the multiethnic empires of Central and Eastern Europe crumbled, their successor states were compelled to sign a series of Minorities Treaties obligating them to grant a degree of national cultural autonomy to their respective minority populations. The Jewish communities of the region – the largest of which was the approximately 3 million Jewish citizens of newly revived Poland – were recognized as such a group, with Yiddish as a national tongue. At the same time, to the East the Soviet Union granted government recognition and funding to schools, press, theater, and book publishing in Yiddish, a level of state support for the language unmatched before or since. Thus Diaspora Nationalists began the interwar period in a mood of great optimism, believing that they had finally secured the rights of Yiddish-speaking Jewry and the prestige of its language and culture.

Folk and Elite

Because of the larger import of its work, YIVO necessarily carried out its scholarship in a symbiotic relationship with the broad Jewish public as it repeatedly proclaimed its desire to "serve the folk." This was in part a legacy of the Haskalah, with its stress on the obligation of intellectuals to educate the rest of the Jewish community who had yet to enjoy the benefits of modern culture. The influence of Russian radical movements contributed the notion of "going to the people" to bring enlightenment directly to the lower stratum of society. In this model, elites would help the masses on their path to intellectual and cultural growth.

Later in the nineteenth century, efforts to develop the Jewish vernacular achieved the goal of "serving the folk" by boosting the pride of ordinary Yiddish speakers. Meanwhile, the institute's research documented the folk's past and present. Thus YIVO's Philological Section – which included the study of Yiddish language, literature, and folklore – examined humble genres including proverbs, folk songs, and folktales. Its Historical Section focused not on the achievements of renowned leaders or scholars but on developments that reflected the experiences of ordinary men and women such as the origins of the Jewish labor movement. The Economic-Statistical and Psychological-Pedagogical Sections concerned themselves with the daily living and working conditions of contemporary, usually impoverished, Jewish communities. As YIVO pursued its work in the interwar period it produced groundbreaking studies on themes that earlier scholars had ignored and that later scholars would find impossible to reconstruct, ranging from Yiddish terminology for various crafts and trades to the inner life of Jewish adolescents.

By taking as their subject the collective actions of large numbers of ordinary people, YIVO's scholarship implicitly asserted the importance and agency of the Jewish masses.[14] At the same time YIVO "served the folk" by disseminating its research findings to a wide audience. In all these ways the institute benefited the entire Jewish public that it claimed to represent. Thus it simultaneously drew on the culture of the masses, elevated it, and returned it to the people, fulfilling Dubnow's mandate to create scholarship both "about the folk and for the folk."[15] Tsemakh Szabad, a Vilna communal leader and major YIVO supporter (as well as a physician), used an anatomical image to describe this relationship to the broad Jewish public: "[There] will flow intellectual juices from the folk to the center and from the center back to the folk."[16]

Yet despite their deep ties to the masses, movements such as Yiddishism were often led by a small cadre of intellectuals far removed from the common people. While the majority of the non–Jewish East European population was composed of illiterate peasants, most of its nationalist leaders were better-educated urban dwellers sometimes not even fluent in the vernacular tongues they championed. Such tensions were particularly acute in the case of academic work, necessarily an elite pursuit. Even as scholars set about studying folk traditions they sometimes showed ambivalence toward the same masses they idealized, seeing them as unfit guardians of the precious culture they carried.[17] In 1930 the folklorist Y. L. Cahan journeyed from New York to Vilna to evaluate the materials that YIVO *zamlers* [collectors] had painstakingly recorded in the *shtetls* [small towns] of Eastern Europe. He later corrected many of the texts, insisting that uneducated informants could not be relied on to accurately relate these songs and tales.[18]

Actions such as Cahan's, some scholars maintain, show that claims to speak on behalf of the folk were more rhetorical strategies than reflections of a true mass movement. The theorist Miroslav Hroch posits that national movements of Central and Eastern Europe began with "a passionate concern on the part of

a group of individuals, usually intellectuals, for the study of the language, the culture, and the history of the oppressed nationality."[19] The nationalist agenda then spread from a few isolated scholars to a wider cadre among the elite. Only in the third and final stage did the masses take up the call of nationalism. Similarly, more recent work argues that leaders in the Austro-Hungarian Empire deliberately politicized language use in order to impose a nationalist agenda to which the populace was largely indifferent. Ordinary Czech and German speakers, on the other hand, took a more fluid and pragmatic attitude toward language loyalty.[20]

The case of Yiddish-speaking Jewry, however, presents an alternate model of the relationship of national elites and masses. Unlike the other groups of the region the Jews of Eastern Europe were concentrated in urban centers and small towns, making them more mobile, easier to organize, and more familiar with modern means of communication such as the press. The great majority of both women and men knew the Hebrew alphabet, which meant that they were potential – if not actual – readers of newspapers and books in their spoken language, Yiddish. These factors presented highly favorable conditions for the creation of a mass movement based in the vernacular tongue. Such a movement, in fact, had its roots in the second half of the nineteenth century, when maskilim and their ideological descendants began creating a modern Yiddish press and literature. By the early years of the twentieth century, when activists reached out to the masses in the name of Diaspora Nationalist principles, the membership of political parties with a Yiddishist platform such as the Jewish Labor Bund and the circulation of daily Yiddish newspapers stood in the tens of thousands.[21]

When research in and about Yiddish began in earnest approximately a decade later, just prior to World War I, belletristic writing had already achieved a high degree of sophistication. The war years saw the establishment of the first schools with Yiddish as the language of instruction. By the time YIVO was founded in 1925, it represented one of the last areas of the culture to reach maturity. For East European Jews, then, scholarship served as the culmination rather than the advance guard of national revival. For other peoples of the region it may have remained the province of a handful of intellectuals, but for Yiddish-speaking Jewry it became the apex of a mass movement, "the crown of the building of Yiddish secular culture."[22]

In fact, while the idea of a Yiddish academic institute originated with a narrow circle of scholars, its work was enthusiastically supported by poor, uneducated Jews as well as a nationally minded elite. The core of YIVO's support was among the impoverished populace of Eastern Europe, where a network of dedicated zamlers gathered funds, folk songs, terminology, and historic documents. A Warsaw paper wrote that "ninety-nine percent" of the institute's supporters were "simple, barely educated or entirely uneducated workers" who through their collection activities "wring out of their lives of hunger a wonderful crown of Yiddish scholarship."[23] Despite the hyperbole of this statement,

thousands of letters preserved today in the YIVO Archives, sent from across the region and from as far away as Canada, Palestine, and Argentina, attest to the popular resonance of YIVO's work. The physical condition of these documents – often filled with spelling mistakes and composed on scraps of paper by correspondents who could ill afford a spare sheet of stationery – offer concrete evidence that Yiddish scholarship did indeed touch the lives of the folk.

Past and Present

This change in the role of Jewish scholarship was part of a larger transformation dating to the Haskalah.[24] The traditional Jewish worldview was essentially theological, interpreting historical events as manifestations of God's will. Only sacred texts, considered the product of divine revelation or inspiration, were deemed worthy of intensive study. Maskilim first brought Enlightenment ideas of objectivity and empiricism to research on Jewish life, paving the way for the Wissenschaft des Judentums [Science of Judaism] movement and its critical approach to Jewish scholarship. In early nineteenth-century Germany Wissenschaft scholars began looking at canonical writings as human compositions and Jewish history as the product of material forces. Some, particularly in the movement's first phase, regarded many aspects of Judaism as rooted in outdated superstition and sought historical or textual justifications for reforms that would promote integration into the surrounding society. This position would lead later academics, including those affiliated with YIVO, to deride the movement for its apologetic tone and pessimistic view of the future of the Jewish people.[25] Yet East European intellectuals would draw on the innovations of the Wissenschaft school in developing their own approach to scholarship.

Here too Dubnow played a central role as a pioneer of modern Jewish history. Dubnow emphasized the ongoing vitality of the Jewish people, in contrast to the more detached and less sanguine view of Wissenschaft scholars. Rather than focusing on the travails of antisemitism or the achievements of great Jewish thinkers, as past writers had done, he stressed the agency of ordinary Jews as the fundamental actors of history. His methodology went hand in hand with his Diaspora Nationalist philosophy, for both asserted the importance of the Jewish masses. Moreover, Dubnow saw historical study – like the use of a national language – as a tool for strengthening Jewish identity in the modern age. As he wrote, "The general Jewish national idea is based primarily on historical consciousness."[26]

Dubnow's work was part of a broader movement, for in the 1880s, the same decade that he began his career, Jewish historical societies were founded in France, Germany, England, and the United States.[27] Moreover, the period between the two World Wars saw the establishment of a number of institutions whose work would closely parallel – and sometimes rival – that of YIVO. Only a few months before the creation of YIVO in 1925, scholars in Palestine laid

the cornerstone of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.[28] The same decade inaugurated Soviet academies for Jewish research in Minsk and Kiev, the Polish-language Instytut Nauk Judaistycznych [Institute for Jewish Studies] in Warsaw, and the modernized Yeshivas Hakhme Lublin [Yeshiva of the Scholars of Lublin], as well as the first chairs of Jewish studies at American universities.[29] Thus YIVO with its Yiddishist underpinnings developed in tandem with other institutions rooted in Zionist, communist, liberal, and Orthodox movements. These diverse efforts to study Jewish life and culture, crossing as they did boundaries of geography and ideology, show the central role of scholarship in helping Western Jewry face the modern era.

In recent years this flourishing of modern Jewish scholarship has itself attracted increasing scholarly attention.[30] While some work has concentrated on the social sciences or literary studies, most has examined changing attitudes toward the Jewish past – a perhaps unsurprising focus, since most has been produced by historians.[31] In addition, interest in commemorative practices and sites has led to a growing body of work on the relationship between Jewish history and memory.[32] In the case of Eastern Europe, some writers have emphasized efforts to preserve historical records or to document aspects of Jewish culture such as folklore that were viewed as remnants of a premodern way of life rapidly fading in an era of modernization and secularization.[33]

Indeed, YIVO built on the work of pioneering figures such as Dubnow and the folklorist and writer S. An-ski who wished to record Jewish traditions that they feared might soon vanish. Yet YIVO's activists, like Dubnow and An-ski before them, sought not only to safeguard the past but also to use it to build a vibrant, modern culture that would speak to the needs of contemporary Jews. YIVO's precursors included not only efforts to create archives and museums but also centers for research, publishing, and teaching. One of the institute's very first initiatives was to create a Bibliographic Commission to collect current Jewish publications from around the world; only later did it establish an archive for older material. Of YIVO's four academic sections – for History, Philology, Economics-Statistics, and Psychology-Pedagogy – only the first was primarily concerned with the past.

Thus YIVO's mandate blended a deep concern for earlier eras with a firm commitment to studying contemporary Jewish society. By demonstrating the continuing vitality of Jewish culture YIVO hoped to strengthen Jewish pride and nationalist claims, while its mission to "serve the folk" demanded that it address issues of immediate relevance to a wide public. As the interwar period wore on, economic depression and rising antisemitism intensified debates over the extent to which YIVO's academic priorities should be influenced by the urgent concerns of the day. Yet its leaders only grew more convinced of the importance of their work, since such conditions made it "pressing and current to the highest degree" to take "a scholarly approach to the problems of Jewish reality."[34]

Objectivity and Engagement

Where YIVO's scholars did disagree – sometimes vehemently – was over the role of political commitment in their work. The majority eschewed membership in a particular political camp as inconsistent with their scholarly standards. In addition, like all those rooted in the Enlightenment tradition, they hewed to the Rankean ideal of uncovering reality "as it really was." They thus regarded empiricism and objectivity as the cornerstones of their methodology. Yet at the same time their research often served manifestly nationalist ends, while their populist commitments shaped their scholarly agenda.

A vocal minority, however, rejected this balance between academics and ideology. Members of the Jewish Labor Bund and the left wing of the Poale Zion [Workers of Zion] – socialist parties committed to Diaspora Nationalism and Zionism, respectively – called repeatedly for the institute to declare openly its political allegiances and to embrace a class-conscious approach in its research. A majority of YIVO's leaders doggedly insisted that their scholarly ideals demanded that they remain aloof from politics. Yet as political and economic conditions worsened, the pursuit of pure knowledge seemed to some a luxury the beleaguered Jews of Eastern Europe could ill afford. The institute's history was thus marked by ongoing controversy over whether political neutrality represented the sine qua non of intellectual integrity or a cowardly evasion of the hour's most burning questions.

Following such debates, some observers have portrayed YIVO's history as a battle between the champions of disinterested research and those who would degrade academic work by harnessing it to a political, particularly socialist, agenda.[35] Yet because both modern Hebrew and Yiddish culture developed in a highly politicized context, from the start political and cultural work were closely intertwined and their relationship hotly contested. It was this milieu that produced the first generation of scholars of modern East European Jewish history, including those affiliated with YIVO, whose research gave primacy to the myriad political movements that flourished on the Jewish street. Literary and educational activities – which often developed later than and as an extension of party work – were frequently read as a function of their creators' political ideology. Later historians have likewise most often focused on political movements, with cultural developments a secondary concern.[36]

Yet with the last generation raised amid the ferment of Jewish Eastern Europe passing from the scene, observers have begun to take a fresh look at these issues. As I have noted elsewhere,

> As the urgency of ideological rivalries recedes, scholars can look past the dichotomies of Yiddishists versus Zionists, pro- versus anti-Communists, and *frume* [religious] versus *fraye* [secular] that for so long marked Jewish society. Only now, two generations after the events of 1939–1945 and 1948, are young scholars at a sufficient remove from these once-burning debates that Yiddish studies may be said to be entering its post-ideological phase.… As Yiddish studies grows more accepted within the academy and more distant