

# MY FUTURE IS IN AMERICA



Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants

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Edited and Translated by Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer



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*Autobiographies of Eastern European  
Jewish Immigrants*

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*Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer*

*Published in conjunction with  
the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research*



*New York University Press*

NEW YORK AND LONDON

Translation copyedited by Sarah Swartz.

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS  
New York and London  
www.nyupress.org

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

My future is in America : autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish  
immigrants / edited and translated by Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer.  
p. cm.

“Published in conjunction with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8147-4019-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8147-4019-7 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Jews—Europe, Eastern—Biography. 2. Jews, East European—United  
States—Biography. 3. Immigrants—United States—Biography. 4. United  
States—Ethnic relations. 5. Europe, Eastern—Ethnic relations.

I. Cohen, Jocelyn. II. Soyer, Daniel.

DS135.E89M9 2005

920'.0092924073—dc22                      2005018192

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper,  
and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## Acknowledgments

In the course of work on this project, we have amassed many debts. First of all, as it is written, “Without bread there is no Torah.” A major grant from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture (NFJC) enabled us to eat as we took a full year to sift through the extensive collection of autobiographies generated by YIVO’s 1942 contest, make our selections, and draft the translations. A grant from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation helped us finish a second part of the NFJC project: an inventory of the collection. We are also grateful to Fordham University for financial assistance. None of this material aid would have been forthcoming, however, if YIVO had not recognized the value of the autobiographies and the worthiness of their publication. Thanks to Lisa Epstein, then research director at YIVO, for first approving the project; to Elise Fischer for producing the grant proposal; and, especially, to Carl Rheins, YIVO’s executive director, for the faith he has shown in the project and for his unstinting and generous support.

“And without Torah there is no bread.” No individual, and certainly not the editors, has mastered all of the knowledge—linguistic, cultural, historical—necessary to understand everything in the autobiographies, much less to translate and annotate them. We therefore leaned heavily on many colleagues with widely divergent areas of expertise. Professors Anita Norich, David Fishman, and Arthur Goren constituted our official advisory panel and afforded us the benefit of their insights into European and American Jewish history and Yiddish literature. Sarah S. Swartz was our discerning editor, whose familiarity with the subject matter made her comments all the more acute.

YIVO’s chief archivist, Fruma Mohrer, shares credit for the translation of the autobiography of Bertha Fox.

Thanks especially to the members of the YIVO staff whom we pestered constantly: Nikolai Borodulin for help, not only with the Russian language, but also with Russian and Yiddish bibliographic queries; Shaindl

Fogelman for cultural references; Hershl Glasser for answering endless queries concerning Yiddish words and expressions, folkways, and customs; Yeshaye Metal for putting up with constant requests for reference assistance as well as dense ignorance concerning the foundational texts of traditional Judaism; Chana Mlotek for help identifying Yiddish songs; Leo Greenbaum for his reference help and acquaintance with modern Jewish social movements; David Rogow, Solomon Krystal, Samuil Goldenberg, and Hinde Jacobs for answering questions about Yiddish; Lyudmila Sholokhova for reference and linguistic assistance; Aaron Taub for his bibliographic assistance as well as his knowledge of religious texts; Marek Web for his help with Polish language and geography; and Vital Zajka for his apparent familiarity with every single Slavic dialect. Other members of the YIVO staff were also helpful. Andrew Demers, Ella Levine, and Linh Nguyen provided administrative support. Aviva Astrinsky, Gunnar Berg, Krysia Fisher, Brad Sabin Hill, Herbert Lazarus, and Fruma Mohrer provided reference support. Special thanks to Jesse Aaron Cohen for tracking down many of the photographs. Roberta Newman and Yankl Salant offered constant encouragement and enlightenment on various issues. Thanks, too, to the able staff of the autobiography inventory project: Donna Gallers, Judith Liberman, Gloria Donen Sosin, and Judith Wolfsohn.

Colleagues not on the YIVO staff also proved indispensable. Tony Michels and Cecile Kuznitz commented on the introduction. Jeffrey Shandler offered advice based on his experience with a similar YIVO publication. Zalman Alpert offered his extensive knowledge concerning Hasidic and rabbinic dynasties. Eve Jochnowitz answered questions about Jewish food, and Ellie Kellman about Yiddish literature. Steven Zipperstein responded to queries about Odessa, Sheva Zucker about Winnipeg, and Gilbert Sandler about Baltimore. Itzik Gottesman helped with Jewish folkways. Thanks to the folks at *American Woodworker* and at the *Galveston County Daily News*. We are also grateful to Jennifer Altermatt of the Children's Hospital, Boston, and Jeanne Abrams of the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society.

Thanks also to New York University Press for seeing merit in this book, and especially to Jennifer Hammer and the two anonymous readers for press, who turned out to be Mark Raider and Beth Wenger.

It has been an honor to work with the writers' children and grandchildren, a living link to the stories in this collection, who generously made possible the publication of this volume: Caila Abedon, Miriam Arnowitz,

Suzie Bobele, Menucha Boomer, Howard Carasik, Hannah Cukell, Ellen Elias, Noel Fox, Alfred Goldstein, Lawrence Goldstein, Charlotte Gordon, Ruth Margolin, Fay Minkin, Sylvia Neff, Reuven Opher, Michael Silverman, Lillian Spitzer, Abe Weiner, Sam Weiner, William Weiner, Celia Weiss, and Betty Weissbecker.

Finally, a *yasher-koyekh* to Max Weinreich and to the autobiographers for all their efforts.



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## A Note on Annotations and Transliteration

In the autobiographies that follow, explanations of terms are given, when needed, in the notes, except when the term in question is mentioned in more than one autobiography. In such cases, an asterisk (\*) is appended to the term in the text and its definition is found in the Glossary.

Yiddish words are transliterated according to the YIVO system of romanization. English words of Yiddish or Hebrew origin found in Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th edition, are spelled as they are in the dictionary. Hebrew words follow the style of the Jewish Publication Society. (When a writer cites from a traditional Hebrew or Aramaic text, however, the transliteration follows a generalized Ashkenazi pronunciation.)



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## Introduction

### *Yiddish Social Science and Jewish Immigrant Autobiography*

*Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer*

The life histories in this book are the product of a remarkable collaboration between a scholarly institution and an immigrant community. In 1942, the Yiddish Scientific Institute (known by the acronym YIVO)—which itself had relocated to New York from Vilna, then part of Poland, only two years earlier—called on Jewish immigrants to write their autobiographies.<sup>1</sup> The call took the form of a contest: the writers were to send their manuscripts to YIVO, which would then judge them and award prizes. In response, more than two hundred Jewish immigrants took part in the contest by writing their life stories. These garment workers, shopkeepers, housewives, communal activists, professionals—and even a couple of writers—had come from all parts of Eastern Europe and settled in the cities and towns of the United States and Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Now, as they seized the opportunity to write their stories, they thanked the sponsoring institution for providing them with a forum in which to express themselves. As Minnie Goldstein wrote to Max Weinreich, YIVO’s guiding intellectual light at the time of the contest, “I have lived my whole life with these events in my heart, and many times I thought that if I had someone to tell my life story to my heart would have been less burdened.”<sup>2</sup> Sixty years later, it is clear that YIVO was serving posterity as well as its contemporary public. We too are lucky that these writers had a chance to unburden their hearts and tell us their life stories.

The autobiographies included in this book capture the collective, many-textured experience of a generation that witnessed great upheaval in

Eastern European Jewish life and ushered in a new era in American Jewish history. Presented here as complete stories, these personal narratives offer special insight into the transition between the Old and New Worlds, revealing new perspectives on some well-studied aspects of Jewish immigration history and also opening new areas of inquiry. The autobiographers offer their own views on religion and political revolt; on the struggle for literacy and worldly knowledge beyond traditional Jewish learning; on masculinity and femininity; on family relationships and the domestic sphere; on upward social mobility and the price of success; and on the definition of success itself. Reflecting on these and other themes, the writers struggled to establish a sense of continuity in their lives in the midst of wrenching and fundamental social change. Taken collectively, these autobiographies present a dynamic portrait of an immigrant generation in its encounter with an epic historical moment, and they testify to the power of storytelling as a historical practice.

Weinreich believed that American Jews had much to learn from the immigrant generation, whose members had successfully negotiated the transition from tradition to modernity and from Europe to America. The immigrants, Weinreich believed, formed a living bridge to the Jewish past and its rich cultural resources, without which a creative and vibrant Jewish identity could not survive. This anthology aims to bring that profound legacy to a new audience by presenting just a small selection of the immigrants' stories to the English-reading public. It hopes to convey some of the immigrants' strength and the intensity of their struggle not only to forge new lives for themselves in America, but also to construct a modern Jewish identity.

### *The Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO)*

The story of how these autobiographies came to be written begins with YIVO and with the ideas of Max Weinreich (fig. 1). Founded in 1925 and based in Vilna, YIVO was one of the bright lights of Polish Jewish cultural life in the period between the world wars. The institute's founders, including Weinreich, were dedicated scholars who worked not only *on* Yiddish, but also *in* Yiddish, the much-maligned vernacular of Eastern European Jewry.<sup>3</sup> YIVO's leaders believed that the Jews of Eastern Europe constituted a distinct people, and that this people had a right to develop its national culture in the countries where it lived. Language was central to YIVO's



Fig. 1. Max Weinreich, director of research at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the guiding light of the 1942 autobiography contest. Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

conception of Jewish peoplehood. Most Eastern European Jews spoke Yiddish, a language that embodied the history of the Jewish people in Central and Eastern Europe and distinguished its speakers from the surrounding populations. But as the Jews' everyday language, Yiddish had always had low social status in comparison with Hebrew, the language of Jewish learning and prayer, and with such highly regarded European languages as German and Russian. One of YIVO's chief aims was to raise the prestige

of the Yiddish language, and therefore of its speakers. The institute also sought to serve the Jewish people by giving them knowledge about themselves. Above all, YIVO's leaders recognized the urgent need to document all aspects of Jewish life, both in the past and the present.

Weinreich soon emerged as the institute's leading intellectual. Trained as a linguist, he hoped to construct a new academic field to study the interaction between "personality and culture"—that is, between the individual and his or her social environment. His interest in the developing personality, especially of members of ethnic minority groups, led him to champion the use of life stories in social scientific research. Such documents seemed well suited to the study of the individual's total development over time, and also more likely to capture the individual's subjective understanding of his or her life, which was of prime importance to Weinreich. Ultimately, Weinreich intended his research to have practical meaning for the Jewish people. With the decline of traditional Jewish culture in the modern world, Weinreich believed, social science would have to provide the positive group identity, cultural pride, and sense of historical continuity that Jews needed as a minority group.

Weinreich's research interests coalesced in three autobiography contests that YIVO sponsored in the 1930s for Jewish youths in Poland. Weinreich intended to use the assembled autobiographies to investigate the problems that young Jews faced and to find positive aspects of their experience that could be built upon.<sup>4</sup> Tragically, Jewish youth quite literally had no future in Poland, and neither did YIVO in Vilna. But the institute survived by transferring its center to New York, where Weinreich and several other YIVO scholars had managed to flee. As an immigrant institution, YIVO struggled to find a place for itself in its first couple of years in the United States. Thus, while YIVO continued to research and publish work on Eastern European Jewry, it also took special pains to sponsor projects that focused on American Jewish life.

### *The Immigrant Autobiography Contest of 1942*

One of YIVO's first major American-centered projects was an autobiography contest patterned after its earlier efforts in Poland. The institute thus turned to a tried-and-true method, but this time applied it to a new constituency with which it had a natural affinity—Eastern European Jewish

immigrants who not only spoke Yiddish, but also sympathized with YIVO's mission of social research. Weinreich realized that the Jewish Socialist and labor movements built by the immigrants served to reinforce their faith in education, knowledge, and culture. As Weinreich put it, "Among those elements with a connection to Yiddish, we do not find, perhaps, a clear understanding of the meaning of research. But neither is there fear of it. On the contrary, the respect for learning lives on, a respect that combines the old Jewish reverence for Torah study with the Socialist labor movement's faith in science as a bearer of progress."<sup>5</sup>

Large-scale immigration to the United States had been cut off, first by World War I and then by a series of restrictive laws enacted in the 1920s, so that by 1942 the immigrant population was an aging one. Although the autobiography contest thus represented a shift in emphasis from youth to middle and old age, it would provide the kinds of material that YIVO wanted. First, immigrant autobiographies would certainly link American Jewry's present with its past, both in America and in Eastern Europe. Second, they would provide clues about the success and failure of various strategies for adjusting to American conditions and for retaining healthy Jewish identities. They could also be used to preserve cultural memory for current and future generations of American Jews cut off from their Eastern European roots.

In late May 1942, YIVO issued the call for a new autobiography contest on the theme "Why I left Europe and what I have accomplished in America." The announcement, which appeared in YIVO's own journal as well as in a number of Yiddish-, English-, and German-language Jewish publications, expressed the organizers' view that the mass migration of the previous six decades constituted a nearly unprecedented historical revolution in Jewish life. It also stressed their belief in the historical importance of the everyday lives of ordinary people. While historians had described the general contours of the migration, and while some famous immigrant leaders and intellectuals had written their memoirs, the "great masses of immigrants, those who struggled and with their own hands built their personal lives and communal institutions in the New World, have not yet had their say."<sup>6</sup>

The announcement explained the rules of the contest and advised contestants on how and what to write. The competition was open to any adult Jew who had not been born in the United States or Canada. The top six winners would receive monetary prizes ranging from twenty to one

hundred dollars. Another nineteen writers would win book prizes. Participants were asked to write a minimum of twenty-five notebook-sized pages and to sign their works only with pseudonyms, enclosing their real name in a separate envelope. The announcement suggested a long list of topics that writers could cover, following more or less the life cycle of an individual and stressing issues that had to do with work, social mobility, and aspirations for children. Above all, the call asked that the autobiographies be “detailed,” “precise,” and “sincere.”

The results were gratifying to the organizers. By the end of the contest, more than two hundred autobiographies had been assembled, together with many letters, photographs, diaries, and other personal documents submitted by participants. Analyzing the returns, the YIVO staff found that 176 of the works had been written by men and 47 by women; that just over half had come from New York, while the others had arrived from 62 other places in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, and Cuba; and that the majority of the writers were between 51 and 70 years of age. The writers came from all over Eastern Europe, as well as from Germany and Palestine, and they had arrived in America in every decade from the 1880s to the 1940s, though most had come in the years of mass migration between 1882 and 1924. Ninety percent of the works were written in Yiddish, with the rest in English, German, or Hebrew.<sup>7</sup>

The participants were both eager to write and uneasy about undertaking so daunting a task. Some reported that they had felt “inspired” after reading about the contest, but they still sometimes hesitated to write, fearing that they were not up to the task. Weinreich responded patiently to many inquiries about technical matters, and he encouraged the writers to persevere. In some cases, he corresponded with participants even after they had submitted manuscripts, urging them to flesh out their narrative and posing specific questions for them to answer. Above all, he reassured the contestants that their lives really did matter and that they had much to contribute to scholarship. “There is no human life,” he told one nervous autobiographer, “that is not interesting to science.”<sup>8</sup>

What ultimately motivated the participants to write? Many of the autobiographers were entering late middle and old age, when it is common for people to take stock of their lives. They felt a need to assess for themselves the very question that the contest theme posed: What, indeed, had they accomplished in America? Writing their autobiographies also gave them the opportunity to link their childhoods in Europe with their adulthoods

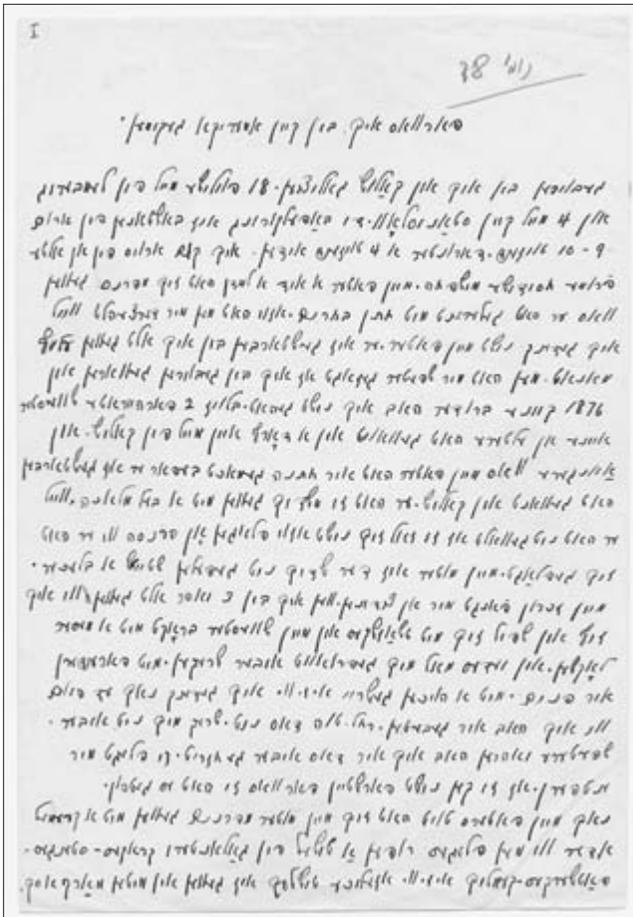


Fig. 2. The first page of Benjamin Reisman's manuscript. Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

in America. The act of writing itself proved a deeply emotional experience, as autobiographers explored memories long buried. As first-prize-winner Ben Reisman (fig. 2) put it,

When I sat myself down at my desk, my God! No exaggeration. Not as in a dream, but as if in reality, I once again became that baby watching his sister