Happy, happy, irrecoverable years of childhood! How can one fail to love and cherish its memories? Those memories refresh and elevate my soul and are the source of my greatest delight.¹

Hershele’s youth passed by swiftly, its bloom was nipped in the bud and while yet a child he became a miniature Jew [kleyn yudel]: depressed, preoccupied, with a worried face and all of the grimaces of a full-sized, married Jew, all that he lacked was a beard. The Jew, in his short life, has to undergo such a plethora of afflictions and suffering that he is left no time for childhood. A momentary gleam like the sun on a turbid winter’s day and it is soon eclipsed in a huge long, dark cloud. Scarcely does a Jew crawl out of his swaddling bands and begin to play than he is snatched away to the teacher’s pointer . . . he is yoked up and giddy-up, giddy-up, little Jew!²

None of us ever did anything to set the world on fire. Dukes, governors, generals, and soldiers we were not; we had no romantic attachments with lovely princesses; we didn’t fight duels, nor did we even serve as witnesses, watching other men spill their blood; we didn’t dance the quadrille at balls; we didn’t hunt wild animals in the fields and forests; we didn’t make voyages of discovery to the end of the earth; we carried on with no actresses nor prima donnas; we didn’t celebrate in a lavish way. In short, we were completely lacking in all those colorful details that grace a story and whet the reader’s appetite. In place of these, we had the cheder, the
Mikhel [the hero of Ilya Ehrenburg’s 1922 The Grabber] is a victim of contradictions, as is Christophe [the protagonist of Romain Rolland’s novel of that name]. A human being is born, he lives, suffers and dies; everything is natural. Christophe lived and suffered; I don’t want to say that he was especially virtuous, a superhuman character. After all, he was nothing more than a healthy human being, who thinks and gets involved in life! Romain Rolland is faithful to reality. But to what extent is his reality ours? Ours is ugly and rotten, but it is still reality as long as we are aware of what it is! Out of awareness comes reality! But what am I saying? All this is natural! Christophe has reached his goal; he is thinking. He smiles warmly with his eyes, his lips move and he says, “Everything is natural!” 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!”

The above texts were penned in 1852, 1889, 1894, and 1934, respectively. The Russian literary critic Victor Shklovsky proclaimed, in 1923, a “law” of the dynamics of literary evolution, according to which: “In the history of art the legacy is transmitted not from father to son, but from uncle to nephew.” The progression from Tolstoy, to Mendele (Abramovitz), to the pseudonymous Yezhik Tomszow of Lodz actually presents a literary line of descent far more knotty and convoluted than that suggested by Shklovsky’s “law.” What is indisputable, however, is that each of these writers, whether he knew it or not—and Tolstoy and Abramovitz certainly did—follows in the path first beaten by Jean Jacques Rousseau, who laid the ideological cornerstone of the modern autobiographical genre: childhood represents the golden age of the lifetime of the individual, and the succeeding stages of one’s life-history mark a progressive degeneration from the prelapsarian innocence and bliss prior to the child’s subjection to the “conventional lies of civilization.”
For Tolstoy it was not too much of a stretch to import the Rousseauian notion of childhood and the autobiographical depiction and apply these to the environs of the Russian gentry; after all, this was a class for whom French language and letters were the conduit of high culture and for whom French was the language of refined conversation. Abramovitz, in the two virtuoso passages cited above, wields a double-edged sword. On the one hand, in stressing the utter incompatibility of the life-history of the East European Jew with the requisite topoi of the West European autobiographical genre, he throws into merciless relief the degradation, spiritual and literal impoverishment, stagnation, uniformity, and relentless monotony of collective Jewish existence—or subsistence. On the other hand, he exposes with no less relentless irony the selfish and shameless hedonism, the wanton disregard of human and animal life that underlie the deeds of the protagonists of the Rousseau-inspired Russian gentry autobiography. For Abramovitz, who spoke Russian at home and whose son was a Russian poet, literature meant principally Russian literature; thus it is natural that his point of reference should be the Russian gentry autobiography, as initiated by Tolstoy. That it is Tolstoy’s *Childhood* he is measuring Jewish life against and vice versa is apparent from some of the chapter headings of the latter work: “Preparation for the Hunt,” “The Hunt,” “Games,” “Princess Kornakova,” “Prince Ivan Ivanovich,” “Before the Mazurka,” “The Mazurka,” and so on. Interestingly, in his exposure of the myth of the gentry autobiography, Abramovitz precedes Maxim Gorky by some two decades. Gorky’s own *Childhood* of 1913 sought to systematically dismantle the Tolstoyan model of the “childhood” that, until then, had so dominated Russian literary discourse.

Finally, we come to “Yezhik Tomszow,” one of the contestants in the autobiography competition sponsored by the Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO) in Vilna in 1934. The book that spoke to the hearts and minds of these YIVO contestants was Romain Rolland’s wonderful bildungsroman, *Jean Christophe* (1902–12). Rolland himself was ultimately a warm Rousseauian and an utterly ardent Tolstoyan—the distillation of the two ultimately producing his title character. No other single work of literature is mentioned more frequently in the autobiographies. For many of these young men and women, the reading of *Jean Christophe* constituted a revelation, a catalyst in the development of sensibilities. *Jean Christophe*, it should be noted, teems with Jewish characters and motifs, from biblical to Dreyfusards:
“You see,” said Christophe to Olivier, after Mooch had gone, “we always have to deal with Jews, nothing but Jews! Perhaps we’re Jews ourselves? Do tell me that we’re not. We seem to attract them. We’re always knocking up against them, both friends and foes.”

The influence of Rolland’s style may often be discerned in these texts, especially in the metaphorical apostrophes apropos of the incidents related, as in the citation from Yezhik. One of the YIVO autobiographers, “Avrom,” even follows Rolland in entitled the second part of his account “Youth.” The universal appeal of this work to troubled adolescents is attested to by none other than Jean-Paul Sartre—a man who once styled himself, not entirely without reason, as “more Jewish than most Jews.” Sartre’s Words constitutes a landmark in the history of autobiographical parodies of Rousseauian autobiographical convention. Sartre’s own intoxication with Jean Christophe, as depicted in The War Diaries, notwithstanding—or perhaps even because of—its self-deprecating tone, speaks eloquently of the enchantment this book held for interwar East European Jewish youth:

Now, if I were asked what I most wished for at that time, to make a good book or to have a great man’s life, I should be at a loss to know how to reply. As for the content of that life, it can be easily imagined: there were solitude and despair, passions, great undertakings, a long period of painful obscurity (though I shly shortened it in my dreams, in order not to be too old when it ended), and then glory with its retinue of admiration and love. I admit to my shame that Jean Christophe, that infamous emetic, more than once brought tears to my eyes when I was twenty. I knew that it was bad, that it presented an abject image of art, that it was the story of an artist written by a philistine academic, but all the same. There was a way of lifting a finger at the end of each chapter and saying: ‘You’ll see! You’ll see! That little Christophe may suffer and go astray, but his sufferings and his strayings will become music and the music will make up for everything’—which used to make me grit my teeth with irritation and desire.

Yezhik, Abramovitz, Sartre, and Tolstoy—especially the late Tolstoy—address a dilemma, again first broached by Rousseau in the Confessions: the dilemma encapsulated in the title of Goethe’s autobiography, Dichtung und Wahrheit. How, that is, to attain authenticity by literary means? All the more so autobiographical authenticity, when the uniqueness of the self—another Rousseauian axiom—may only be compromised by the application of received narrative models for the presentation of the life? Conversely, how would it be possible to write
an autobiography without the narrative models provided by literature? This dilemma is especially vexing when the writer is a partial or complete autodidact in the realm of literature, as is true of the majority of the YIVO autobiography contestants. For the latter, books, procured often with great difficulty and read in circumstances unconducive, if not inimical, to reading, let alone thought, provided the sole conduit for the acquisition of the rudimentary instruments for self-portrayal in the written word. Sartre attempted to resolve this conundrum by writing a self-lacerating autobiography exposing the “madness” the internalization of received literary conventions plunged him into; the denouement of the work is his renunciation of liberation from literature. The inescapable irony of all this, however, is that Sartre “chose” a life for himself that did correspond rather closely to that of Jean Christophe: “You’ll see, that little Jean Paul may suffer, etc.” And Sartre’s childhood, in his own depiction, cannot be viewed but as absurdly privileged by comparison with that of the YIVO autobiographers—in fact, even by comparison with that of “Jean Christophe.” Thus, his oft-cited dictum, “I loathe my childhood and all that remains of it,” while quite possibly true, cannot but sound hollow when measured against Yezhik’s “Romain Rolland is faithful to reality, but to what extent is his reality ours?” Or, more pointedly, the declaration of a young female contestant in the 1932 competition: “There still dwells within me a too deep and virulent hatred of my own childhood for me to be able to say anything objective about it.”15 Max Weinreich, in his extensive monograph on these autobiographies, appends the latter citation with the remark: “Not everyone is capable of expressing themselves so unequivocably and open-heartedly as this writer, but the same applies to a great number of the authors of our autobiographies.”16 And Sartre/‘Poulou’s’ repeated cavils with respect to the corrosive effect upon his selfhood of early exposure to the “Lives of Famous Men” cannot but appear precious besides “Forget-me-not’s” Jobian plaint in her 1934 autobiography:

What does life mean? Can I use this beautiful word to describe the hard and thorny road that I’ve travelled? 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?17

Here Forget-me-not (and she is by no means alone in this among the YIVO autobiographers) echoes the 21-year-old Yosef Hayim Brenner’s autobiographical novel of 1902, In the Winter:
I have prepared for myself a notebook of blank paper, and I intend to write several notes and sketches from “my life”—“My life”—in quotation marks: since I have neither present nor future, the past is all that remains. . . . Nevertheless, even though I am no hero, I wish to record this past of mine, the past of my absence of heroism. The past of heroes is written for the wider public and acclaimed by this public; my own past, the past of a non-hero, I write for myself and in secret. 18

If, for Sartre, the dissonance between life and “literature” led to a lifetime’s literary denunciation of literature on the level of theory and, on the level of praxis, a deliberate attempt to purge himself of the internalized bourgeois literary models and idées reçues that erode the freedom and authenticity of the individual, then how much the more so would such be expected from the Jewish autobiographer? From the evidence of the “canonical” literature, represented by the likes of Abramovitz and Brenner, however, and corroborated by the YIVO autobiographies, we find the case to be quite the contrary. “Literature,” for the YIVO contestants, is invariably perceived in terms of liberation of the self, which is sometimes the only “road to freedom”—to employ a Sartrean coinage—afforded the individual within an environment in which individualism and autonomy are hemmed in and encroached upon from all sides.

The majority of these autobiographies were written in conditions of grinding poverty, several in conditions of utter destitution: conditions utterly inimical to the act of solitary reading and its attendant reverie, let alone to the writing of autobiography. In addition to the class/eco-nomic factor, traditional Jewish culture looked very much amiss upon the reading of secular literature and in general upon activities that were nonproductive and pursued in isolation19—aside, that is, from the study of Torah, and this was studied communally. Solitary creative writing pursued for its own sake was looked upon with especial disfavor. Thus the experience, as recounted by Brenner above, is echoed in much of the autobiographical literature of this period and later, as well as in the YIVO autobiographies:

The desire to write developed within me from the dawn of my youth. I constantly persisted in “wielding the sword of the scribe” over all that surrounded me, over all that occurred at home, in the Kheder and the Kloyz—the three houses that I knew. . . . My father found this writing of mine worthy of being displayed to the entire community, so that everyone would know that his Jeremiah was an adept in the holy tongue. For all this he would prevent me from writing as much as I desired. In his opinion, it sufficed to write one large florid piece [Melitah gedolah] for the purpose
of display and nothing more. . . . And when I would complain on occasion somewhat confusedly, that I was not writing for others, the disputation ended with a redoubtable slap on the cheek.20

Jeremiah’s mother attempts to intercede on her son’s behalf, upon which she receives the stinging rejoinder:

“Shut up, dumb-cluck!,” my father answered. ‘I ‘graced’ him with a slap in return for responses like this: ‘I write for myself.’ . . . Some bigshot! He writes for himself . . . and I don’t understand: if not for display—what’s the point of writing? Who needs this piffle?21

The Autobiographies of Readers

Many of the YIVO autobiographies are those of readers, and the act of reading is depicted in each, to greater or lesser degree, as a catalyst in the life-history. The centrality of the reading experience for this generation of Jews, as evinced in these documents, is corroborated by the statistics. Moyshe Kligsberg, drawing upon two Polish population surveys of 1921 and 1934, makes a reckoning of approximately 450,000 Jewish youths from the ages of 14 to 20. Being one of these youths himself, a native of Warsaw, he provides the following testimony:

On the basis of many years of direct observation, I can posit that a minimum of two-thirds read books. On average, one book a week was read (usually on a day off, the Sabbath, or Sunday; the book was exchanged for another). There were, of course, some who read scantily, but to compensate for this, there were many more who devoured books, several a week or even on a daily basis. It thus transpires that Jewish youth in Poland, in the course of a year, read fifteen million books in their entirety, that is—that every library was, on average, read through in the course of fifteen years.22

The largest category of books consumed was, according to Kligsberg, belletristic.23 In these autobiographies, the act of reading is almost invariably with a marked turn to introspection, a turn associated with the discovery of a language with which to depict the inner self. It is thus no coincidence that the initiation into literature is often accompanied by the decision to write a journal. The YIVO autobiographies reveal a generation of journal-keepers, regardless of gender—though the keeping of an intimate journal in other cultures is a disproportionately
feminine phenomenon. Indeed, so many diaries were submitted in accompaniment to the autobiographies proper in the 1932 and 1934 competitions that Max Weinreich, in his analysis of the documents deriving therefrom, devoted three methodological excursi on the phenomenon of the youth diary.

With respect to the relationship between literature and self-awareness, and the ability to express this self-awareness, the YIVO autobiographers speak most eloquently for themselves: thus, 19-year-old “Esther,” born into a strict Gerer Hasidic household:

There was a library at school. What treasures I imagined were to be found behind the glass panels of the bookcases! When I came home and said that the teacher had given me permission to sign up for the library, Father stopped eating his dinner and declared that under no circumstance was I to read any Polish books. Once again I swallowed tears of genuine regret. I simply could not understand why Father would not allow me to read them. . . . Mother came to my aid. Together we decided that I would register at a library without Father’s knowledge. And this is what I did. 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 to escape 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 secret. . . . I became a world unto myself. Thoughts tortured me and would not let me rest. . . . I was afraid of myself. Often I did not want to be alone. I was afraid of my thoughts. In addition my friends grew distant from me. Actually, it was I who withdrew from them. Still, I felt the need to confide in someone, to pour out my heart. My public-school friends were childish and empty and could not understand me. I had no intimate girlfriends. Then the thought of writing an intimate diary occurred to me. . . . I was silent only with other people; for myself—I wrote. No one knew what lay hidden in the pages of my notebook. Perhaps only the trees could have revealed this, but they were silent witnesses and for this I loved them. Under their gentle, maternal shade I poured out my heart, my feelings, and the thoughts that tormented me. I loved nature and she inspired warm and trusting feelings in me. She would not reveal my secrets. How magnificent she is!

We may gather from this passage that Esther’s father was not altogether misguided in his extreme misgivings concerning his daughter’s readings; of the books that she read, Esther sensed an especial affinity with the lives of the Christian martyrs. And the marked alteration he perceived in her behavior as a result of these readings, on the basis of her own account, must have given rise to understandable paternal...
consternation. In a more harmonious cultural setting, the transmission of book/oral traditions from one generation to another serves to consolidate the family and to establish continuity and connection between the microcosm of the family unit and the wider community within which it is situated. The longer duration of shared historical memory is thus assured. It is clear, from the testimony of Esther and of many other YIVO autobiographers, that reading, for this generation, performed precisely the opposite function. Esther finds a surrogate mother in nature, a surrogate friend and confidant in her diary; her links with family, wider community, and the larger cultural memory that encompasses these two, are increasingly attenuated, in measure with her greater absorption in books. Likewise, a young man from Brisk writes: “I was lonely, and suffered greatly from this. I immersed myself deeper in literature. The tragic poets Byron, Shelley, Heine, and Bialik became my friends.”

This process, by which reading opened up a path to communion with the self but also conduced to sundering of communion with family and community, is attested to by “A. Gryna” in 1934. Of urban proletariat background, his early youth marked by bouts of juvenile delinquency on the streets, alternating with backbreaking work at the sewing machine in his parents’ home workshop, he reports:

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 in the 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 parted company with the friends I had then. Often they made fun of me, but a few came even closer to me. Knowing that I read books, they would insist that I tell them stories, stories from the books. . . . One by one I broke with all 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. . . . Then on one of these evenings, an idea suddenly burst into my mind like a bolt from the blue, an idea that made me tremble with joy: to write a diary. Yes, a diary. With every passing minute, my decision became more and more certain. And so I began. Oh, how much lighter my mood became with every page I wrote! With pen on paper, I poured out everything, everything that I had kept in my heart and soul over time.”
The degree to which new patterns of reading now foster an increasing intergenerational mutual lack of comprehension is well illustrated in the following passage from the Polish autobiography—the choice of language in itself is, of course, significant—of "Emtepa," the son of an impoverished leather-worker, written for the 1939 contest. Here we are given a trigenerational perspective:

My father divided up his workday according to a kind of schedule. In the morning, he always sat down to read the newspaper. Each day he would spread open the enormous pages of Der moment (and, later, Di naye folksaytung, which he still reads), devouring the print with his eyes. . . . When his work was finished, he would often open a book and read for quite a long time. Sometimes he would engage his father in conversations which made no sense to me. Grandfather would bring in some oversized books, point to certain passages on the enormous pages, and command my father to read. As a rule these conversations between father and son came to a stormy end. Grandfather would shout, and my father would respond in kind, raising his voice somewhat.

What is remarkable in this passage is that, whereas father and grandfather are at least capable of a degree of dialogue, albeit disputatious, based on shared knowledge of sacred texts, Empeta’s Jewish cultural illiteracy is such that they may as well be conversing in Hottentot. This tragic breakdown in communication between fathers and sons, and between siblings as a direct result of the exposure to literature in the widest sense of the term, is brought home poignantly in Avrom’s 1939 “Diary of a Jewish Youth,” the first section of which is entitled “My Family and I.” Although Avrom gives testimony to the same broader cultural syndrome as do Esther, A. Gryna, and Empeta, his perspective is rather different, underlining—as these autobiographies so often do—the veracity of the Tolstoyan dictum: “All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” “My father,” Avrom writes,

is a wretched overworked man. . . . He endured all the horrors of the world war as a Russian soldier. . . . He seems to know nothing but the struggle to make a living. He works until midnight, and he’s glad when we, his children, do so too. In particular he can’t stand my reading and studying. . . . But I’m an enlightened person, and I can’t imagine that work, the means of this existence, is also its end. Mankind is meant for higher things. . . . He and I are of two separate worlds. . . . If he weren’t my father, there would be nothing to tie me to him. Much the same can be said of my younger brother Perec. . . . He is very empty. In his whole life, he’s read perhaps one or two books. . . . I’m unhappy and my soul is
torn. Sometimes it upsets me that I’m not as frivolous and empty as they are, or that they aren’t as educated as I am. . . . I pity them, I feel contempt for them, and yet—I love them.30

It may be added, in light of the above passages, that the actual writing of these autobiographies and diaries, often undertaken clandestinely, further fostered intrafamilial, intergenerational mutual alienation. The writing of a diary clearly adduces to a measure of introspection, even solipsism. Standing back from those closest to one in order to provide the type of “objective” portrait of family, friends, teachers, economic conditions, etc. that YIVO requested of the autobiographers encouraged a self-distancing from and critical evaluation of the home environment.

The parallel between the above statements and that of Richard Wright in one of the most celebrated, commented upon, and best-selling American autobiographies of the twentieth century, Black Boy, points to the relatively unexplored field of the study of Jewish autobiography and that of other oppressed groups.31 And, no less than in Jean Christophe, it is encounters with Jews—felicitous or otherwise—that play a disproportionate role in Wright’s account of the realization of the self. Thus Wright, on the impact of his first reading of novels and the consequent estrangement he experienced from his family and friends, writes:

What then was there? I held my life in my mind, in my consciousness each day, feeling at times that I would stumble and drop it, spill it forever. My reading had created for me a vast sense of distance between me and the world in which I lived and tried to make a living, and the sense of distance was increasing each day. My days and nights were one long, quiet, continuously contained dream of terror, tension and anxiety. I wondered how long I could bear it.32

Weinreich himself was in fact fascinated by the life-histories of African-Americans in the South; he recalls his experiences there and encounters with African-American youth at several points in Der veg tsu undzer yugnt.33 Nor was the interest one-sided. On September 8, 1938, John Dollard, upon the invitation of YIVO, delivered several papers and held seminars for the Aspirantn. Dollard’s topics included “The Life-History of a Young Black Girl from the Poorer Class” and “The Life-History of a Young Black Man from the Lower Middle Class.”34 Dollard was one of the scholars to whom Weinreich makes a personal dedication in the foreword to Der veg.35
In an extremely influential essay of 1956, Georges Gusdorf attempted to locate the autobiographical phenomenon from the long perspective of fundamental reorientations in the history of mentalities. “The conscious awareness of each individual life,” he writes, a “pre-condition” of autobiography,

is the late product of a specific civilization. Throughout most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community. No one is rightful possessor of his life or his death; lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being—or, rather, isolation is impossible in such a scheme of total cohesiveness as this. Community life unfolds like a great drama, with its climactic moments originally fixed by the gods being repeated from age to age. Each man thus appears as the possessor of a role, already performed by the ancestors and to be performed again by descendants. The number of roles is limited, and this is expressed by a limited number of names. Newborn children receive the names of the deceased whose roles, in a sense, they perform again, and so the community maintains a continuous self-identity in spite of the constant renewal on individuals who constitute it.36

This “unconsciousness of personality,” he continues,

characteristic of primitive societies such as ethnologists describe to us, lasts also in more advanced civilizations that subscribe to mythic structures, they too being governed by the principle of repetition. Theories of eternal recurrence . . . fix attention on that which remains, not on that which passes. “That which is,” according to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, “is that which has been, and there is nothing new under the sun.”37

Traditional Jewish culture in Eastern Europe, I would argue, approximates the type of “more advanced civilizations that subscribe to mythic structures” as posited by Gusdorf. Indeed, his depiction of a pre-autobiographic, or non-autobiographic, culture, bears many of the traits of Jewish culture as depicted by Abramovitz in the above citation from Beyamim habem. And this is how Devorah Baron depicts Jewish shtetl life in the pre–World War I period, in her memoiristic depiction “Family.” Where Abramovitz is bitter and ironic, Baron, like many of the YIVO autobiographers depicting Jewish life prior to the cataclysm of the war, is wistfully lyrical and nostalgic:
The chain of generations, how it began and developed, is briefly recounted in the Bible. Here we read of a certain man who lived for so many years and begat so-and-so, and then of so-and-so who lived for so many years and begat sons and daughters—link after link in a chain that is never broken for it is ever renewing itself. . . . And to Adam were born Cain and Abel and Seth; and Cain begat Enoch, the same Enoch in whose lifetime his father built a city. And Seth begat Enos, and Enos begat Cainan, and Cainan begat Mahalaleel, and Mahalaleel begat Jared, and Jared lived a hundred and two and sixty years and he begat—Enoch . . . .

In my little town, where people were named after their late grandparents or great-grandparents, this continuity was even more pronounced. Take our baker, for instance, from whom I bought a loaf of rye bread every day: Leizer, the son of Haim, the son of Meir. Sixty-year-old Leizer only fetched the water from the well for the kneading; it was his eldest son, Meir, who did the actual baking. He also had a small son—Haim—who was still at Kheder. The family had been bakers for generations. The only change that ever took place was that, when one of the Meirs became too old and too weak to stand at the oven, he would go out to draw the water and his son, Haim, would take over the baking, and when Haim grew old, he in turn would fetch the water, leaving the baking to his son, Leizer. 38

In one of the first essays written on the topic of Jewish autobiography in the first decade of the twentieth century, the literary critic Bal Makhshoves (Eliashev), bemoans the relative dearth of Jewish autobiographical literature. In adducing reasons for this lacuna from a psycho-historical perspective, he speaks in terms that are strikingly proleptic of Gusdorf’s observations:

The Jew, however, is, by nature, both in dotage and in middle age, a type of Kohelet [Ecclesiastes], who maintains that “there is nothing new under the sun”; the external forms of a life that changes over the years are of little concern to him. He is more interested in the essence and, according to his philosophy, the essence of a human life, by contrast to its external forms, does not change. He has no sense of the external aspects of a human life and will, moreover, not concede, as contemporary scholarship claims, that externalities also may be internalized, that the development of a child in the womb is not dependent solely upon inherited characteristics, transmitted by the seed, but also upon what the pregnant mother eats and drinks. . . . A man who feels within himself the desire to describe the course of his life’s path . . . senses intuitively that what one man experiences within a lifetime, is never repeated in the life of another. There are not to be found in nature two identical peas, two identical human beings all the more so. . . . He feels that his life is both significant and interesting. And it is precisely these two conceptions of the self that give him the courage peacefully and possessedly to describe each trifle in his external
Bal Makhshoves’ essay is especially pertinent within the present context: he concludes by making the practical suggestion that local Jewish cultural associations/clubs should actively encourage the writing of autobiographies, and that the texts thus engendered should be “meticulously filed and stored in the archive of the association. And the firm conviction that there will eventually come a time when these texts will be collected, like nuggets of gold, will without doubt serve as a constant source of encouragement for these important associations.”

Bal Makhshoves’ prophecy was indeed to be realized in the systematic cultivation and preservation of Jewish autobiography by the YIVO Institute both in Vilna and in New York.

It should be noted that Bal Makhshoves was by no means alone in bewailing the absence of the autobiographical element in Jewish literature in Eastern Europe, Yiddish literature in particular. Thus, in a 1920 essay, Shmuel Niger, who inherited the mantle of Bal Makhshoves as the doyen of Yiddish literary critics, writes, in the context of a synthetic survey of Hebrew and Yiddish literature in the wake of the World War I:

Jewish literature has from time immemorial devoted itself more to the collective than to the individual, more with the community Yisroel than with Reb Yisroel. . . . Is the reason for this that the individual in his own right has been so enmeshed and intermingled with the collective, that his own, discrete self was scarcely perceptible? Or, quite simply, that the “pathological condition” of the Jewish collective has compelled us to surrender ourselves to it in perpetuity and to devote our attention and creative will exclusively to the collective? . . . To be sure, “society,” the collective, the Folk occupies a prominent place in other literatures, but this is for the most part in the first “prehistorical” period of their development. . . . After Homer, where we see the life—and the imagination—of the Greek collective, there follow the—no less national—Greek tragedians, who already devote themselves to the individual. And even in Homer Folk does not take pride of place, but rather his hero, the great personality. . . . The history of the Folk is the history of heroes. . . . For us, to the contrary, the history even of the heroes is the history of the Folk. . . . Our literature is impersonal, just as is our God. . . . Even in modern Yiddish literature, even the very latest, that declared: “Let us build a temple for the unique human individual!”—even this literature has not banished the shadow of the collective which follows upon our heels. For a short while this was not to be discerned, it appeared that the revolt of the literature of the self had driven away the last trace of this shadow, and that the national motifs at
evidence in some of the young writers appeared to be purely subjective motifs, but the spirit (together with the agony and the shame, which is even greater than the agony) of the collective once again bestirred itself, and again there resumed in Yiddish literature the old conversation between the community of Israel and ourselves, her children. 41

Given these prognostications by the two leading Yiddish literary critics of the day—and in the critical discourse surrounding autobiography both in Hebrew and Yiddish, theirs was the common consensus—it would be expected that the YIVO autobiography competitions would have received scant attention. All the more so since the “pathological condition” and “agony and shame” had proceeded apace during the temporal interval between Niger’s article of 1920 and the first YIVO contest of 1932. As for the “shame” factor, it suffices to recall that the final competition took place in 1939. Hence Kligsberg, in his masterly “analytical topical guide” to these autobiographies, writes:

The great majority of the families of our group belonged to the poor section of the population, since adequate food—according to the habits of the given social environment—was constantly lacking. . . . In many of the documents hunger occupies a considerable space in the narrative; in some it is dealt with at great length. A still stronger factor than actual hunger was the constant process of pauperization which affected all social strata of the Jewish population in Poland since the beginning of Poland’s independence in 1918. . . . The process of pauperization had a more profound effect on the minds and moods of the young people than a more or less constant status of poverty. The experience of having less food day after day, less and worse clothing, of moving constantly to smaller living quarters, increasing lack of means to pay tuition, etc.—all this influenced mightily the attitude of the young people toward the problems of their future and left a lasting impression upon their personalities. 42

This is how one of the contestants describes the conditions under which his autobiography was written, and his depiction is by no means atypical:

My thirst for knowledge became greater and greater. But how and when to read? On arriving home late at night, my parents are asleep, the room is suffocating, you sit down to read, and you are constantly cajoled: why don’t you go to bed? Shut the lamp, we can’t sleep, have to get up early. . . . Always thinking about the autobiography. You have to get on with it, the deadline’s coming up. I sit down and start writing, and rats are running around the room. There is one standing in the kitchen, baring its teeth, it makes you want to throw up. How on earth can one read, let
alone educate oneself? What is more you doze off in the middle of it all from the fatigue from a whole day’s labor.\textsuperscript{43}

It should be stressed that, for the above writer, as for many other YIVO autobiographers, “home” consisted essentially of one room, and the families of these writers were typically large.\textsuperscript{44} Thus, Esther concludes her 1939 autobiography on the following poignant note:

Through my neighbour’s thin, wooden walls I hear the whirring of a sewing-machine. The sound clatters in my head and interferes with my work. At the same moment I think: how limited my aspirations are! I desire nothing more than to have a room of my own. That is how I am: a great, beautiful, idealistic thought runs into material obstacles. But this, in turn, provokes fresh ideas.\textsuperscript{45}

The absence of “a room of one’s own,” let alone the £500 annual income, which, according to Virginia Woolf, are the prerequisites of a woman author, constitutes, indeed, a considerable “obstacle” to the fostering of a rich inner life, let alone to the writing of a diary or of an autobiography.\textsuperscript{46} Esther, who lives in one room with her mother and sister, somehow manages to conceal both her diary and her autobiography:

I am writing this despite the considerable risk. . . . Only the assurance that those to whom I write will abide by my wishes that nothing be revealed publicly has given me the courage to write. No one at home knows that I am writing. My notebook is well hidden. Only my girlfriend knows about this.\textsuperscript{47}

We do not only have here the absence of walls, doors, drawers, etc., as physical safeguards for a minimum of personal privacy. The very notion of privacy appears to have been essentially foreign to traditional Jewish culture. Michael Stanislawski pointed out to me something I had previously never noted: there is actually no indigenous word in Yiddish, the language in which the great majority of these documents are written, for “privacy.” Taking all of this into consideration, it is utterly to be wondered at that the majority of these autobiographies were ever written, let alone preserved and mailed at the initial expense of the contestants.

In view of all this, the sheer quantity of personal documents received by YIVO in response to these competitions is to be wondered at. The first competition was less widely publicized than the later two and, being confined to Vilna and its environs, of lesser outreach. Still, this
competition alone yielded some 35 documents, constituting over 2,000 pages of material. No doubt encouraged by this initial response, the Yugntforshung section of YIVO announced “a major competition for the best autobiography of a Jewish youth” in the YIVO Yedies of early 1934. The competition, which carried several financial prizes, was aimed at the 16- to 22-year-old age group of both sexes. A 25-page minimum was stipulated and longer submissions were encouraged. Candidates were further encouraged to accompany their submissions with diaries, should these be available.

The response to this competition exceeded all expectations. By September 10, 1934, no fewer than 235 documents had been received, some accompanied by personal correspondence and diaries. It was thus decided to postpone the deadline for the competition from July 1 to October 15, 1934. In the “Preliminary Assessment of the Autobiography Competition” published in November 1934, astonishment was again registered at the sheer scale of the response. YIVO, apparently, received “hundreds” of inquiries concerning the competition, and the organizers estimated that “with no exaggeration” the competition “drew the interest of several thousand young men and women.” Of those who showed interest, 252 had, by October 15, 1934, succeeded in submitting completed autobiographies. Only 15 percent of the participants submitted autobiographies of the minimum length of 25 pages; the average length was 60 pages. Forty participants submitted autobiographies of 100–500 pages long. The sum-total of pages of all the autobiographies taken together was 14,200. In addition, 24 participants submitted diaries; the length of several of these ran to a thousand pages. The 1938–39 competition yielded similar results.

It should also be noted that the Yugntforshung section of YIVO was not the only scholarly department of the organization to solicit autobiographical material. The historical section, for example, organized a competition in 1939 for the best autobiographical depiction of the events of World War I:

The competition . . . has been greeted most sympathetically by the Jewish community, as is to be seen from very considerable number of responses. People from the most varied social circles, community leaders, rabbis, teachers, workers constantly address themselves to YIVO with written inquiries concerning details of the competition. It transpires that not a few had already in hand completed memoirs of that tempestuous and horrifying period, not a few had even kept a diary, noting the events of that extraordinary period.
In mid-1936, the following bulletin had also been published:

The Psychological-Pedagogic section and subgroup of Yugntforschung have received: Descriptions of the Kheyder following upon the questionnaires of the psych-ped-section—Dovid Neuman (Tarnopol); M. Tolpin (Ostra); L. Shtarkshteyn (Poltosk); Bentsiyon Bruker (Khelem). B. Braverman has sent 1) description of the Kheyder in Bilsk, 2) biography and a rich collection of personal documents concerning the life of a young Jewish man, 3) rich collection of letters from young people. Ephraim Greenberg (Lipkon)—a large collection of letters of a Yeshive-bokher; Kh. Pishchhatzer-Mann (Brisk)—memoirs of a group of graduates of the Jewish Folkshul in Brisk (1924–1928); N.A. (Vilna)—description of a psychological disease of a young girl; X—diary of a mother about her little girl; “Young Poet” (Brisk)—autobiography and diary; “Tsi Simple Man” (Pshet) (Warsaw)—autobiography; Leon Kahana (Lemberg)—diary of a young man; Sh. Bornshteyn (Khelem)—autobiography of a young man; Borekh Melamed (Slavetish)—autobiography of a young man.

Weinreich, by now on American soil, wrote in 1946 that, aside from the material gleaned from the three autobiography competitions,

YIVO had already received by means of special arrangement other personal documents. At the outbreak of World War II, the Vilna YIVO had in its possession approximately 700 personal documents, the sum-total of pages being in the high six figures.

In a follow-up competition held by the American section of YIVO in 1942 for autobiographies of Jewish immigrants to the United States (to be entitled “Why I left the homeland and what I have accomplished in America”), 221 autobiographies were received, constituting a total of 25,000 pages. All but 20 of these autobiographies were written in Yiddish. Just as with the European competitions, the U.S. institute was staggered by the number of documents received. And by their length: the average length of these manuscripts was 110 pages, and a 25-page minimum had been stipulated. Many documents were accompanied by diaries, correspondence, and other personal materials. And, as in Vilna, the institute was compelled to extend the original deadline several times.

In view of Bal Makhshoves’ and Niger’s essays highlighting the absence of the autobiographical in the Jewish literary street, and the consonance of their remarks with the observations of Gusdorf, the question poses itself: what were the causes of so marked a shift in mentalities in Jewish culture that conduced this flood of confessional
literature? The first of the YIVO competitions took place, after all, only 12 years after Niger, a critic whose intuition rarely misled him, predicted the progressive eclipse, both in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, of the individual in favor of “collective motifs” (Klal-motiv). The financial incentive of the prizes YIVO offered for the best autobiographies should not, of course, be underestimated, especially given the very real hunger of many of these contestants. And yet, as Weinreich points out, active response to the summons for autobiography is conditional upon a prior and innate disposition toward autobiographical self-expression. Weinreich reports that in the 1934 competition alone several dozen of the contestants were explicit in their expressions of gratitude for the YIVO Institute for providing justification and context for already-existent stirrings of autobiographical consciousness. Besides, what may have been initially undertaken with pecuniary considerations in mind might subsequently become a goal in and of itself, a confirmation of the Talmudic injunction to “study Torah not for its own sake, for not for its own sake adduces to its sake alone.” In illustration of this, one contestant writes:

I was at the place of a girlfriend of mine and there I learned from her younger sister of the YIVO competition. My interest was immediately aroused and I informed myself of the precise details. I then set to work. My girlfriend’s sister would not pass up any opportunity to ask: “Nu, how’s it going? And what do you expect to get out of this?” “If I win a prize”—I answer back—“you’ll have a cinema ticket on me!” I confess: were it not for the 150 gildn prize, I would not have set about writing straightaway. But I must also say: now that I have already finished the work, I couldn’t give a tinker’s curse about the prize. I am extraordinarily happy with the work, because I had long considered writing my autobiography, it just didn’t happen. Then YIVO came and provided me with the will.

Here are a few of the impressive number of citations Weinreich selects from the 1932 and 1934 competitions in demonstration of the extraordinarily powerful compulsion to confess that motivated these youths:

I begin to write these memoirs with tremendous eagerness, for this is one of the very few occasions I have to pour out my heart, as the expression goes.

I have composed my autobiography not in order to receive a prize, but simply to immerse myself in my memories and depict them.
For a good time now, my soul has longed to reveal before others the scroll [Megile] of pain and innermost sufferings that have been my lot from time immemorial.66

I have never had the opportunity to penetrate my inner life. And how necessary and important it is for he who suffers in spirit to gain insight into his past experience, in order to find the root of the toxic tree that poisons an entire human life. . . . In employing my biography-description [Biografie-bashrayb], I wish first and foremost to become engrossed in examination of my inner life of the years gone by.67

Precisely the same emotions were reiterated in many of the documents of the 1939 competition and the correspondence accompanying them. Many of the competitors reported that they were emboldened to fulfill their prior confessional urge, precisely because those who were to read these autobiographies were unknown to them and their friends and families.

If we compare the above citations concerning the writing of the autobiographical text and those cited earlier concerning the experience of reading novels, a definite analogue emerges between the two experiences. “To immerse myself in my memories,” “to penetrate my inner life”: such experiences correspond precisely to the introspective turn attendant upon the act of reading, as this is depicted by the YIVO contestants. Most telling in this respect is the young man who wishes “to reveal before others the scroll of pain and innermost sufferings.” For here the writing of the self is implicitly correlated to an act of self-reading. Likewise, in the testimony of the young man who goes under the pseudonym Ha-mithadesh—“he who is renewed or regenerated” or “renews or regenerates himself”—there is an implicit analogy between the “becoming engrossed” (Fartifn zikh) in the “biography-description” of his past intimate life and the becoming immersed in a novel, particularly a novel of the Jean Christophe “biography-description” variety. All of this very much corroborates the following observations of José Ortega y Gasset in his “Notes on the Novel”:

In my judgment, this is of paramount importance to the novel. The author must see to it that the reader is cut off from his real horizon and imprisoned in a small, hermetically concealed universe—the inner realm of the novel. . . . To achieve this, the author must begin by luring us into the closed precinct that is his novel and then keep us there cut off from any possible retreat to the real space we left behind. . . . The author must build around us a wall without chinks or loopholes through which we might catch, from within the novel, a glimpse of the external world.68
From the evidence of the YIVO autobiographies, we may infer that, just as dreams provided Sigmund Freud the “royal road to the subconscious,” so did the novel provide this generation of East European Jews a corridor to the inner life. Marcel Proust’s meditation upon the relationship between book and reader is extraordinarily apposite in the present context:

In reality every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer’s work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself. And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its veracity, the contrary also being true to a certain extent, for the difference between the two texts may sometimes be imputed less to the author than to the reader.69

It was thus through the “optical instrument” of the book that was achieved, in Gusdorf’s fine formulation, “the difficult evolution—or rather . . . involution of consciousness” that serves as a “precondition” of the autobiographical act.70

“What Are Novels for If Life Is a Novel?”71

There is, of course, quite a leap from attaining what may be termed autobiographical consciousness to actually writing an autobiography. Hence the disproportion between the interest in the 1934 competition evinced by “several thousand young men and women” and the number of documents actually received. Whence does the fledgling autobiographer receive the language for the outpouring of the soul? Whence, indeed, did Rousseau acquire the language with which he wished to “render his soul transparent” in the *Confessions*?72 It is to Philippe Lejeune that we owe the fundamental insight that autobiography is a “secondary” form of literature—secondary largely, that is, to the new forms of prose discourse afforded by the prior emergence of the novel. “To all appearances,” Lejeune writes,

it is as though autobiography were destined by definition to employ exclusively traditional narrative forms, or, let us say, to employ a given mode of recounting, only after it has become traditional. . . . Autobiography cannot be the “laboratory” of modern narrative forms: it avails itself of narrative forms that have already been well tried. . . . The history of autobiography is inconceivable without taking into account the general
history of narrative forms, of the novel, of which, when all is said and done it is but a particular variant. . . . Autobiography is, in literary history, a secondary phenomenon, dependent upon already accepted novelistic writing.  

The cardinal achievement of Rousseau is thus, according to Lejeune, not to have invented autobiography ex nihilo but rather in his reapplication of fictional devices created in the “laboratory” of the novel to the depiction of the self. The YIVO autobiographies provide impressive corroboration of Lejeune’s observations concerning the dialectics of the fictional/novelistic and the autobiographical. What is of particular interest here is the belatedness of the phenomenon in Jewish literary discourse. It is as if the centuries of literary evolution that led up to the writing of Rousseau’s Confessions and the 150 years of autobiographical variation and development that succeeded it are here telescoped into the life span not even of a generation but of an individual—an individual moreover of 23 years of age or under, as per the stipulation of the competitions. Thus Avrom writes in 1939 of the catalyst in the development of his consciousness brought about by the reading of Robinson Crusoe—a crucial work, as Ian Watt has demonstrated, in conducing to that “introspective habit” that was later to achieve fruition in the Rousseauian autobiography.74 “Tor,” of Hasidic background, writing at the age of 21 in 1934, received his induction into the world of literature, at the age of 15, through the mediation of Bresler’s Library in Warsaw, as did two other brothers, likewise of Hasidic background: I. J. and Isaac Bashevis Singer.75 “At the time,” Tor, who elects as his titular pseudonym “The Reader,” writes:

I knew as much about literature as a Cossack knows the Psalms in Hebrew. The first works I read were by Mendele Moykher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem and Lissitsky. . . . From day to day I became, so to speak, newly born. . . . Lermontov, Pushkin, Yesenin, Tagore, Baudelaire, Rainer Maria Rilke, Heinrich Heine—these writers showed me a bright, new world. . . . Then I started reading proletarian literature, all in Yiddish: Reyzen, Rosenfeld, Vinchesky, Leyvik, Shvartsman, Broderzon, Mani Leyb . . . Hofman, Kharik, Fefer, Kvitko, Markish, Bergelson . . . Gorky’s Three, Fran’s Thais, Barbuse . . . Tolstoy . . . Rolland . . . Shakespeare . . . Schopenhauer . . . Weininger—[and the list continues].76

With respect to the extraordinary belatedness and preternatural acceleration of Tor’s and the Singer brothers’ intellectual trajectory, it is illuminating to compare the account given by Y. L. Peretz of his first acquaintance with secular knowledge in the late 1860s. It is as if many
Jewish youth in the interwar period recapitulated the experience of the early pioneers of the Haskalah—the Jewish Enlightenment movement—as it emanated from late-eighteenth-century Berlin. One YIVO autobiographer, for example, entitled his life-history *Ha-toeh be-darkhei ha-hayim* after Perets Smolenskin’s gigantic Hebrew bildungsroman, published in four parts from 1868 to 1876. The title page of the latter document bears a striking pencil-drawing of the Ahasuerus-like “Wanderer” (*Toeh*), a stick in one hand, lamp in the other, bent under the weight of a bundle of books tied to his back with rope. The spine of one of the books reads, in Hebrew script, *Rolan*, the phonetic equivalent of Rolland.77 And compare Peretz’s memoiristic account of his entrance to the forbidden garden of the library of secular books in his native Zamoscz in the mid- to late 1860s with that of Tor, as above:

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—Dumas . . . Sue . . . Hugo, and so on. There would be a tenth volume of Sue, followed by a ninth volume of Dumas, or a third volume of Hugo. But I read on anyway . . . Soon after, I came across the Napoleonic Code in Zanyavsky’s translation. I read it . . . Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England* . . . Hartmann . . . and Carl Vogt to boot.78

One of the most striking phenomena of these texts is that, though we have seen that the experience of reading was of cardinal significance in many of these young lives, of the many manuscripts I have read, I have found specific reference to the reading of only one Jewish autobiographical text: M. L. Lilienblum’s 1876 Hebrew *Hatot nevirim*. It is, rather, the discovery of literature per se that seems to have animated the autobiographical impulse. And it is imaginative literature per se, whether this be the saga novel in autobiographical or biographical form, like *Jean Christophe*, or lyric poetry, rather than specifically autobiographical literature, that provided the contestants with the language for exploration and depiction of the self. This is, of course, not to say that many of the contestants had not read, or were unaware of the existence of, autobiographical works written in Hebrew or Yiddish and other European languages. Given how well-read many of these young men and women were, as attested to by Tor, who is by no means unrepresentative, the latter seems highly improbable. So it is all the more to be wondered at that, among the hundreds of literary works cited in these autobiographies as marking an epiphany in the development of character and consciousness, so very few should be actual autobiographies.
This is in sharp contradistinction to the evolutionary dynamics of the larger autobiographical tradition developed in Europe, which is characterized by its continual cross-referencing with other autobiographical texts, chief among them, of course, Rousseau’s *Confessions*; autobiography thus becomes a convoluted inter-referential polyvocal and polyglottal conversation.79 Even Dostoyevsky’s “underground man” engages in a polemical discourse with the Rousseau of the *Confessions*, availing himself in so doing of Heinrich Heine’s critique of Rousseau’s putative autobiographical sincerity: an odd assemblage, to say the least.80 Such an implicit conversation may also be seen in the preface to Abramovitz’s autobiographical *Beyamim hahem*. And the “canonical” tradition of autobiographical writings in Hebrew and Yiddish, as it had developed by this period, manifests such an internal conversation between autobiographical texts: Lilienblum converses in his autobiography with such autobiographical predecessors as M. A. Gunzberg and Sh. D. Luzzatto; Sholem Aleichem with Abramovitz; Brenner with Lilienblum and Abramovitz; and so forth.81 Many of the YIVO autobiographers, conversant with Hebrew and/or Yiddish, certainly read many of these latter writers—they all find mention in the autobiographies, Sholem Aleichem being the most frequently cited. It is thus all the more telling that these Jewish predecessors were most definitely not the sources of autobiographical inspiration and identification. Thus Kligsberg writes:

> It is worthy of being stressed that, even though these youths were the most enthusiastic readers of Yiddish literature, the literary heroes, nonetheless, that they adopted as exemplars for their personal dreams and ideals, they found in world-literature. . . . In Yiddish literature they sought above all national self-awareness, self-analysis of the Jewish character and essence, but the personification of their inner aspirations they found in (romantic) heroes of world literature.82

This is not entirely surprising: positive heroes in post-Haskalah Hebrew and Yiddish literature were few and far between, as intimated by Brenner’s above-cited preamble to *In the Winter*.83 Among the most favored literary heroes of Jewish youth, Kligsberg mentions “Jean Christophe,” of course, as well as “Elyasha Karamozov,” Jack London’s “Martin Eden,” “Dr. Yudym” in Zeromski’s *Homeless People*, and “an array of Tolstoy’s heroes, etc.”84

We are thus, paradoxically, returned to the state of autobiographical innocence that characterized the literary environment of the pioneers of the autobiographical genre—Rousseau, Franklin, Goethe, Casa-
nova, and others. Indeed, this relative state of autobiographical innocence may, in and of itself, have contributed to the extraordinary vivacity, freshness, and freedom of expression encountered so often in the YIVO autobiographies. Again, Lejeune’s comments in an essay entitled “Teaching People to Write Their Life Story” are highly pertinent—especially given that the YIVO announcements of the competitions with their stipulations and suggestions for the contents and structure of the manuscripts were attempting to teach Jewish youth to do precisely that:

The essential thing is to organize encounters with texts. Must these texts be autobiographies? I’m not sure. The richness of the autobiographical genre is due to the fact that, following the example of the fictional genre, it can be nourished by everything: poetry, theoretical reflection and—the novel itself. The great authors that we suggest that students imitate never started by writing their autobiography; they always had, outside of the experience of life itself, that of other forms of writing. Why not do as they did? . . . A workshop or writing exercises whose objective is not autobiography are perhaps more effective than teaching that strictly follows the standard practices of the autobiographical genre. We learn the resources of writing better in a space of chance and freedom, when we are not trapped by the obligation to tell the “truth.”

The testimonies of Esther and A. Gryna, as cited above, are typical of a multitude of the YIVO autobiographers who underwent just such a literary “workshop” within the walls of the newly created cultural institutions of the Jewish library for secular books in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish and of the “locals” of the various ideological parties—Zionism in all varieties, Bundist, and to a lesser extent communist—many of which themselves possessed a library. Indeed, it is clear from many of the documents that, for the majority, the initial appeal of the “local” was not ideological in the least but stemmed rather from a hunger for culture, specifically literature. Again Kligsberg writes wonderfully on this topic:

Buying one’s own books to read was clearly out of the question given the appalling poverty of the Polish-Jewish population. The sole recourse was a communal library. And it was the library that was the most important institution in the shtetl, and the creation of a library—one of the most urgent tasks upon the horizon of every youth-organization. The library performed as central function in the life of the Jewish youth as did the Beys-medresh for the religious constituency of the shtetl.
Kligsberg cites one contestant from Ostryn, a shtetl with a community of 1,067 Jews:

There are several people in our shtetl whose formal education consisted of little more than the Kheyder and yet are quite cultivated and enlightened, all thanks to the library . . . . Here is the university, here is the inexhaustible source of knowledge. *The library has a holding of two thousand volumes.*

When a “local” organizational meeting-hall possessed its own library, Kligsberg’s analogy with the Beys-medresh, the nerve-center of the traditional Jewish community in Jewish Eastern Europe, is even more compelling. “In the local,” he writes,

the beloved library was also, it goes without saying, to be found, where one borrowed books, had a chat about a book one had just read. The local was also a place for creative work, such as writing for a “wall-journal” [*Vantsaytung*], or an organizational journal, recitals at a literary evening, taking part in the production of an amateur dramatic production.

Among the “new modes of behavior” associated with the “locals,” Kligsberg highlights the significance of walking, either in small groups or in twos. These walks were also of a decisively literary character; the Werther-like conjunction of a heightened appreciation of nature with literary and aesthetic contemplation, as is described in many of the YIVO autobiographies, is in itself a manifestation of the belated romanticism characteristic of this young Jewish generation. It is also characteristic, however, that whereas Rousseau and Werther were solitary walkers, the walk provided for the innately sociable Jewish romantics a sort of collective solitude. Thus Kligsberg’s depiction of the “walk”: “Books were an especially beloved theme on the walks. For around such themes more open expression was given to personal, intimate moments, since every individual had his or her favorite literary heroes, with whom they would identify."

The above passage is extremely suggestive; for here an innate connection is posited between the reading and discussion of literature, of whatever genre, and the dawning of individualistic self-awareness. Empathetic identification with literary “heroes” enabled the individual to give voice to 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 local played no small role in teaching Jewish youth to think, speak, write—autobiographically. They were “autobiographi-
cal workshops.” Indeed, following upon the announcements of the YIVO competitions, we find in several of the YIVO documents depictions of discussions within the youth groups upon the topic of “how to write one’s life-story.” Given the hothouse intellectual atmosphere of the “local”/library 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 collectivity).” it is to be supposed that such debates must have been fairly widespread and passionate.

One very striking feature that emerges from these autobiographies is the extremely high proportion of young Jewish readers in this period whose reading conduces directly to writing. This phenomenon is also attested to in the contemporaneous Hebrew and Yiddish bellettristic and journalistic literature. The Grafoman, in this literature, is a frequent figure of ridicule, and Sholem Aleichem, the most popular Yiddish writer of the period whose works are frequently cited in the YIVO autobiographies, was himself a graphomaniac of monumental proportions. An extraordinarily large number of the YIVO autobiographers render accounts of their first experiments in poetry and imaginative prose; many—Emtepa, for example—provided examples of this literary juvenilia. This is in addition to the number of journal-keepers; the journal itself may actually be viewed along a continuum with literature, in the broadest sense of the term. This is well demonstrated in the testimony of Esther, who, at the age of 19, had already written two novels, numerous poems, and a play that she alone staged:

I don’t know how it happened, but my thoughts began to take shape in rhyme. While I was jotting down thoughts in my diary at the end of the day, without any effort I would write in verse. . . . This was a revelation to me. I didn’t know whether to be happy or worried—happy at the fact that I had succeeded in writing poetry or worried that I would not have the opportunity to develop this further.

In fact, we may even include the personal letter within the category of literature—in light, for example, of the testimony of Yezhik, that “the last letter I sent from prison filled up a whole notebook.” Thus Avrom, later crowned by his comrades with the title “Avrom the Poet,” shortly after the depiction of the impression left upon him by the reading of Robinson Crusoe, is moved to write a Crusoe-like autobiographical poem, in which he traces this sea-change in conception and self-conception:
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, where the sky touched the water all around. I described the beauty of nature. Schools of fish and the flight of seagulls, the setting of the sun, the quiet murmur of the waves. . . . In the endless sea, I depicted life, and in the young man, myself. I gave it the title “Alone Among the Waves.”

The degree to which literary models were internalized, and subsequently held up as a mirror, distorting, reflective, or both, of the self, is illustrated with extraordinary emotional nuance in the 1934 Hebrew autobiography of a young girl from Vilna. The daughter of a promiscuous, alcoholic man, hungry, unwashed, “dressed” in putrid rags, all but blind in one eye, and with a chronic and disfiguring dermatological condition, this young girl describes the compensatory mechanisms of one temporarily deprived, by force of circumstance, from belletristic sustenance:

My material situation being critical, I ceased to read. This cessation was experienced initially as a hole in the heart. Eventually, I accustomed myself to store in memory, for hours on end, the various circumstances of the heroes, the secondary characters, and this provided me with ample compensation.

With a change for the better in her circumstances, the author returns to her reading/self-reading:

When reading a book, I would dwell longest over the depictions of the heroes. The author would provide a detailed depiction of their external appearance and, in particular, of their eyes, the eyes in whose expression there was so so much, their eyes, their eyes! What had their eyes to do with me? . . . At such moments I experienced repugnance toward my own self and to all that surrounded me, even the mirror reflected my calamity, woe is me!

The degree to which categories of literary experience have been internalized by this generation may also be gleaned from those who make a point of stressing the nonliterary nature of their autobiographies. Hence “Eter’s” opening sentence: “Although what I am writing is not in the least like a novel, I will start with a prologue.” Eter concludes her life-history, however, with a highly literary epilogue:
All day long the same thought pounds inside my head: “Will I pass?” Many times a day, I recite to myself Julian Tuwim’s poem “If Only...” I call it “Hope.” It goes like this: “And if nothing? And if no? / I was poisoned by delusion / O you brightness! O you wonder!” etc.

And in an extremely well written autobiography by a precociously erudite budding poet, we read:

I didn’t (as writers often put it) “tumble into a void...” Although it is not an “amorous” friendship, as the French author Henri Bordeaux defines a certain intimate type of friendship, it is nevertheless durable.

It takes a fairly high level of literary cultivation to detect and self-consciously resist the models that literature imposes upon “life”—witness Dostoyevsky and his Hebrew/Yiddish-writing counterpart, Brenner.

Poetry and Wissenschaft

In light of the discussion above, Weinreich’s statement—though it should be remembered that he writes prior to the 1939 competition—appears highly questionable:

With respect to the great majority of the participants in our competition, the assertion is surely correct: the material that they sent is for them absolutely not literature, but life.

Weinreich sought to set the study of Jewish youth through the employment of the personal document upon a “scientific” basis, with the attendant sociological assumption that “life” and literature are utterly incompatible. We thus read such quasi-algebraic formulations as:

If in a specific environmental situation “S” the element “s1” changes to “s2,” what alterations occur then within the personality of the individual “i1” to “i2”? And vice versa, from the standpoint of the personality: if in the personality of the individual “I” element “i1” changes to “i2,” what alterations does this lead to in the environmental situation “S”?

Weinreich here, and elsewhere in his book, effectively distill the “scientific” by purging these documents of what he views as their literary dross. Given that he himself was a great literary scholar and had written extensively as a literary critic and historian, the almost total absence of literary considerations in Der veg is all the more to be
wondered at. Indeed, when Weinreich does speak—perfunctorily—of the literary character of these documents, his tone is defensive, even apologetic:

But there does also exist a group of participants with *writerly* ambitions. The word “ambitions” should by no means be construed as pejorative. I simply state it as a fact.103

And two pages later, with respect to this group of participants with “writerly ambitions”:

I have intentionally relayed so many voices from this category [i.e., “literary” documents] in order that I may declare with a clean conscience that I have allowed the great majority of the contestants with literary aspirations to speak freely. There is a school of thought that maintains that writers of autobiography who have literary inclinations import into their documents specific defects. . . . Be this as it may, we must emphasize that the “young lions,” literary beginners, constitute an extreme minority among the writers of the autobiographies in the YIVO collections.104

Weinreich’s equivocations concerning the literary aspect of these documents is also evinced in his own Yiddish coinage, *Literatureven*, “to make literary.” In his usage, the term carries a somewhat pejorative accent. Thus in his section “‘Lies’ in an Autobiography,” apropos of the social-scientific value of the autobiography of “Vladek” published by William J. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, he writes:

Vladek, the author of the autobiography, is really not much of a man of letters; he has an extremely poor vocabulary and had read very little in his life. But, in a certain sense, this is an advantage for the author of an autobiography; he is thus spared from excessive “making literary.” “Making literary” is a characteristic to which we must pay great heed in analyzing an autobiographical document. That is, for a certain writer (and by no means only for the “young lions,” this may also apply to a perfectly ordinary young man), 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.105

Weinreich thus undertakes to isolate the “scientific”—that is, “life” prior to its being written—from the “literary.” But is this really possible?
How to conceive of any form of written document, autobiographical or otherwise, sociological indeed, that does not “borrow” from the adopted or ready-made of a shared discourse of metaphors, analogies, images, and so forth? I would argue, contra Weinreich, that the importation of belletristic models, apparent in greater or lesser degree in all of the YIVO autobiographies, was sine qua non not only for the writing of these documents but also for the sense of individual selfhood that existed prior to taking pen in hand. Thus, the elegant and piercing summation of Lejeune, on the topic of Literatureven:

The autobiographer could not realize himself other than by imitating people who imagined what it was like to be an autobiographer. A singular game of mirrors, which demonstrates that sincerity is learned, that originality imitated, and that we do not have here the genius of several individuals but a general transformation of the notion of the person through the appearance, within a society, of a new form of narrative-discourse.106

Weinreich’s strictures and prescriptions in his lengthy methodological discussions of the sociopsychological significance of the Jewish youth autobiographies, in particular, and of personal documents, in general, may at first sight appear to be fairly irrelevant to a discussion of the literary context of these documents. But it should be borne in mind that, since the appearance of Weinreich’s Der veg in 1935, with its extensive citations from these youth-autobiographies and accompanying interpretation, Weinreich’s writings should be included within the literary environment of the YIVO contestants. This is especially so since Der veg is both a psychological inquiry and a summons to the reader. Thus, on the page preceding the beginning of the work proper, we read:

TO THE READER
LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION
OF THIS BOOK
WRITE US ALSO FACTS THAT
CONFIRM OR CONTRADICT
THE PREMISES OF THIS BOOK
Zydowski instytut Naukowy
Wiwulskiego 18, Wilna

Another, much more detailed appeal is made on the page preceding the index: “What Every Reader Can Do for the Study of Youth.”
Some indication of the wide circulation of Weinreich’s work is that, by early 1939, the volume had been “completely sold out.” Bear in mind, also, that given the poverty of the youths to which it was addressed, the disproportion between sales and readership was of necessity large. A new edition was planned with additions, including a review of the autobiographies submitted for the latest competition.107 Naturally, one of the first books an aspiring contestant would consult, prior to writing the autobiography, would be Der veg. Weinreich was the guiding spirit of Yungntorfshung, the initiator of the autobiographies project, and the founding father of the YIVO organization itself. Thus, the closer the autobiographical submission approximated what Weinreich considered a “good” autobiography, obviously the greater chance of attaining the coveted prize. There is also, as Lejeune has pointed out in his discussion of the methodological dilemmas of compilations of oral autobiographies of those who do not write, a significant class or status disparity between researcher and researched that comes into play. To which should be added, in the YIVO autobiographies context, a considerable age differential. “The investigator,” Lejeune writes,

is always a person of writing, belonging (whatever his political opinions might be) to the ruling classes and linked to an institution (publishing, university, newspaper, museum); he investigates on behalf of the general reading public or the “scientific community.”108

Almost all of the accompanying letters to the YIVO autobiographies that I have read exhibit extreme self-consciousness, reservations concerning the worth of their submissions, and apologies for the limitations of their written Yiddish: testimony, in itself, of the authors’ consciousness of these disparities. After all, Yiddish-writing intellectuals with academic doctorates (or Hebrew, for that matter) were rare birds indeed in this literary and intellectual environment, almost to the point of exoticism.109 Weinreich was, according to Lucy Dawidowicz, “always impressed” by “academic credentials,” though he did, she says in her memoirs of the YIVO Institute in Vilna in 1938–39, learn “to respect the gift for scholarship exhibited by several of YIVO’s self-taught Aspirantn.”110

The influence of Weinreich in shaping some of the autobiographies is no more clearly discerned than the influence of Freudian psychology in the self-analytical moments in many of these documents. Weinreich knew Freud, and it was through his mediation that Freud agreed to become an honorary fellow of YIVO.111 Weinreich, and the YIVO
Institute itself, played an important role in disseminating psychoanalytic theory among Yiddish readers. For example, in the first volume of *YIVO bleter* appeared an article by Ts. Rudy, entitled “What Is the Specially Jewish Element That Jewish Psychologists Have Introduced to Scholarship?” And in the *YIVO bleter* of 1937, we find a translation of a German essay by Siegfried Bernfeld, originally intended as an address at the International YIVO Congress of 1935, on the onset of male sexuality in puberty. In the latter piece, involuntary emissions, masturbation, etc. are discussed at length and with candor. Weinreich himself translated Freud’s *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* into Yiddish; the translation appeared in three volumes from 1936 to 1938. He also published a monograph in Yiddish, *Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud and His Method* in 1937.

In his brief foreword to *Der veg*, Weinreich writes of the treatment of the citations from the autobiographies in his study: “I wish here to remark that I considered the documents as psychological, not as linguistic material.” He is especially concerned by the virtual absence of any account of sexual life in the autobiographies:

> Bashfulness is manifested in particular when it comes to matters pertaining to sexual life. In the thirty or so autobiographies submitted to YIVO in response to the first 1932 competition, there exist a sum-total of two in which we find the barest mention of sexuality; in the remainder, total silence. Are we to infer from this that this entire sphere of life was simply lacking for these writers?

Weinreich returns to this topic in his addendum to *Der veg*, “The Sex-Life of Jewish Youth,” which is, in effect, an appeal for more specifically and explicitly sexual material from the YIVO autobiographers:

> I am well aware of the lacuna of this book, in that there is virtually no discussion of the sex life of Jewish youth, especially in view of the fact that, in the first part, in treating the transition from childhood to puberty, the role of sexuality is strongly emphasized. The reason for this lacuna is simple: *I know nothing* about the specific forms of sexual development among our youth. This is yet to be studied, and those who appreciate the necessity of such a study must come to our help with their observations of themselves and of others, however difficult it may be to divulge secrets of so intimate a character.

Presumably, this appeal (among other factors) had the desired effect, at least upon the male contestants. For we read in Kligsberg’s

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Marcus Moseley
1965 summation of the autobiographies, under the rubric “Sexual Maturity”:

The great majority of the girls scarcely touch this subject, whereas boys are very frank and often relate their sexual experiences at length. Not one of the girls tells anything about her early sexual observations or knowledge. . . . Many of the boys speak about their masturbation and sometimes in great detail. . . . In a few cases boys relate about collective masturbation of groups of boys that they observed. . . . As far as love in the period of later adolescence is concerned, girls discuss it more often and more frankly. . . . The boys relate their love affairs in great detail; they enumerate all the girls they were going out with, tell about intimate relations, including intercourse. 

Several of “the boys” also write openly of homosexual encounters in their autobiographies. Yet it is not only in the sexual sphere that the influence of psychoanalysis may be detected in these documents. We may note, in many of the YIVO autobiographies, the manner in which some acquaintance with psychoanalysis conducd to analysis of the self through the prism of psychoanalytic categories. Again, a telescoping of literary/intellectual history is apparent here: the discovery of literature coincided with that of Freud. In one particularly fascinating testimony, in the autobiography of “Zetar,” we see how the simultaneous impact of the Musar movement’s introspective self-accounting and Freudian technique conducd to the introspective turn. But, even where Freud is not directly mentioned in these documents, there is ample evidence of his impact. Many of these writers speculate upon the subconscious motivations for their actions and those of others, the psychological dynamics of their parents’ marital relationship, the effect upon later character development of childhood trauma, and so forth. In the autobiographies written in Yiddish—that is, the great majority—Weinreich, and the YIVO publications in general, may be credited in no small part for providing these young writers with the language of psychoanalysis, inter alia, by means of both Der veg and his Freud translations.

Creating a Language for the Self

It was not only the language of psychoanalysis that many contestants acquired in part through the mediation of Weinreich and the publications of the YIVO Institute. It was, at a more global level, the capacity to think/write autobiographically in the Yiddish language. Weinreich
himself notes, in the foreword to Der veg, the essential incapacity of the Yiddish language of his day to map, analyze, and explore the inner lives of Jewish youth—the "selves" to whom the book seeks a "way":

One more apology for the language of this book. Many of the terms will ring rather odd. But I see no way around this. Yiddish does not have the adequate expression for everything; one must become a partner in the process of Creation [Mayse-bereshis] to a greater degree than is desirable. A second option would be to transliterate German words in Yiddish orthography and deceive oneself that this is Yiddish. But, in my opinion, a new, as-yet-unworn Yiddish word is a thousand times better than a Germanic barbarism. . . . In my mind, I reprocessed everything in Yiddish, and it was of no concern to me whether somewhere or other an existing linguistic form was to be found or not. With respect to the style that is, on occasion, rather difficult, I draw some consolation that this is not entirely my fault: I address myself, after all, to topics that are difficult in and of themselves.119

Thus, ironically, Weinreich himself contributed to the process of Literatureven—the borrowing of analogies, coined by others, in the depiction of the self, a practice that he elsewhere deplores.

Kligsberg, in defense of the "graphomaniacs" and of the "tendency of the youth to write 'belletristically'" (Literarish), notes that, far from detracting from the "authenticity" of the YIVO autobiographies, these characteristics actually proved enabling, even essential for the coming-to-being of these documents. He notes that the "scribblings" (Shraybekhtsen) of many of these youths that arrived by the pile on the desks of the Yiddish press editors actually provided a schooling in the art of writing. And the best proof of this, he writes,

are our autobiographies themselves. The great majority of them are written in a fine style, in a rich, and very frequently quite subtle language, a number of them distinguishing themselves in the high degree of intelligence and self-analysis.190

In light of these documents, one can only wonder how many potential Yiddish writers of stature were included in the ranks of the YIVO autobiographers. The collection includes the autobiographies of Mendel Mann and the Vilna poet Leyzer Wolf. It also includes the autobiography of the Vilna-born Hebrew and Yiddish literary critic Shmuel Werses. Is it coincidental that Werses essentially pioneered the literary study of Hebrew autobiography in a highly sophisticated and sensitive article that remains essential reading on the topic to this day?121 The
dexterity with which these writers employ Yiddish as the language of self-representation is all the more remarkable given the Jewish linguistic situation in Eastern Europe at the time. One result of the cataclysmic effect of World War I upon Jewish life in Eastern Europe was the decline in traditional Jewish Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism. Many of the YIVO autobiographies reflect the rapid process of linguistic assimilation, especially to Polish. Again, in this context, we note the acceleration of Jewish cultural history. The sociopsychological consequences of this transitional phase in the language patterns of East European Jewry is well demonstrated by the opening lines of the autobiography of Gershon Pipe, the brother of YIVO ethnologist Shmuel Zanvil Pipe:

As I sit down to write my autobiography, I don’t actually know what language to use: Yiddish, Hebrew, or even Polish. There are problems I think about in Yiddish; these are primarily matters connected with day-to-day life. Questions concerning Palestine and Zionism, I think about in Hebrew. There are also, however, many matters about which I think in Polish—I mean things relating to school, general and Polish history, world geography, and so forth. I’ve decided to write in Yiddish as I expect that my autobiography will consist of my everyday experiences.

A. Gryna finds a way out of this linguistic conundrum by devoting himself heart and soul to Esperanto; he even keeps his journal in this language. What is more, many of the YIVO authors give accounts of their difficult (and often belated) initiation into the Yiddish language. Thus Avrom reports that in his schooldays he “still did not know how to read or write Yiddish,” that he loved “Polish and the Polish language more than Yiddish.” And Esther writes, in Yiddish:

Lately, however, one question began to trouble me: Why didn’t I write in Yiddish? Since I was a Jew, why did I have to write in a foreign language? The answer was quite simple: until recently I hadn’t read any Yiddish books, other than those translated into Hebrew. . . . I promised my diary that I would write in Yiddish, although this would entail certain difficulties. Despite my promise, I continued to write in Polish.

Again, one of the curious aspects of this late conversion to Yiddish as a written language is that it reflects very much the same wavering and equivocations concerning the language as we find in the pioneer Yiddish writers of the second half of the nineteenth century: again, testimony to the long duration of the Haskalah. Thus Shmarya Levin, writing of his first writing experiments in the 1870s:
One thing is quite certain to me; the first language I used in writing was Hebrew. The fact is, it never occurred to me to write Yiddish. Everybody knew Yiddish; what was the marvel, then, of writing in that language?127

The persistence of such reservations concerning Yiddish as a medium of literary expression is attested to by A. Litvak, writing of the socialist “Jargon Committees,” the predecessors of the party “local,” in the early 1890s:

In the word “jargon” in the name Jargon Committee, no conscious disdain was implied. The fact of the matter is that, at that time, it did not occur to even one of us that what the Jewish masses spoke was a language.128

Clearly, the decision to opt for Yiddish was in no small part determined by the obviously Yiddishist orientation of the organization that sponsored these competitions. I have had frequent occasion to note the extraordinary telescoping of literary evolution in the Jewish Eastern Europe of this period. This applies all the more so to Yiddish literature. A substantial secular and modern literature in Hebrew actually preceded that in Yiddish by a century. As late as 1912, Ber Borochov, in his programmatic manifesto “The Tasks of Yiddish Philology,” writes:

The most crucial challenges of Yiddish philology may be formulated otherwise, as the nationalization and the humanization of the Yiddish language. Nationalizing Yiddish, constituting it as a national language in the true sense of the word, means purifying it and enriching it so fundamentally that it is able to express all of the manifestations of Jewish creativity. Humanizing the language means, in the broadest sense, employing it as a weapon by means of which all the cultural riches of modern universalistic progressivism may be annexed to the zone of the Jewish people; it is the task of Yiddish philology to further the process by which the Yiddish language becomes a national culture medium and education medium for the people and for the intelligentsia.129

Since “humanization” and “nationalization” are defining aspects of literature, in the post-Romantic sense of the term, how can a language that possesses neither of these attributes give rise to such a literature? Borochov does note that classic Yiddish writers such as Abramovitz—whom Borochov refers to as the “Columbus of the Yiddish language”—Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem have “enriched and cultivated the coarse language of the Folk.” Their achievements, however, represent an uncoordinated “chaotic creation-process”: the total rehabilitation of the
Yiddish language Borochov calls for cannot rest upon the shoulders of a handful of gifted individuals. At best, these and other figures demonstrate the potential for a full “humanization” and “nationalization” of the language. I would argue that YIVO, in sponsoring the autobiography competitions, actually served as the catalyst for the very process that Borochov calls for. That is, what we witness in these documents, and in the accounts of their coming-to-being, is the forging—or, pace Weinreich, “reprocessing” (Durkhtrakhtn)—of Yiddish as a language adequate to the depiction of the self.

The literary significance of this is all the more remarkable in that there is a marked anti-autobiographical animus in Yiddish prose; in the canonical literature, it was Hebrew that served this task. It is not coincidental that the two classic Yiddish autobiographical texts, Abramovitz’s Shloyme Reb Khayim’s and Sholem Aleichem’s Funem yarid, are written in the third person. Although there is an abundance of memoirs in Yiddish in which the protagonist is the observer and describer of others rather than the self, there are very few autobiographical confessions on the model of Rousseau in this language. Those that do exist—such as Peretz’s Mayne zikhroynes (1913–15), better translated as My Memories than My Memoirs, and A. Almi’s (Sheps) Kheshbm un sakhakh (1959)—are exceptions that prove the rule, and are so noted by critics. The paradoxical tendency of the Yiddish writer to be absent from his or her own autobiography is graphically depicted by Sholem Aleichem in what must be one of the strangest autobiographical preambles ever written:

I’ll talk about myself in the third person. I, Sholem Aleichem the writer, will tell the true story of Sholem Aleichem the man, informally and without adornments and embellishments, as if an absolute stranger were talking, yet one who accompanied him everywhere, even to the seven divisions of hell. . . . Sholem, the hero of this autobiographical novel.

No such autobiographical compunctions are to be found in the YIVO documents. True, as per the YIVO stipulations, these were pseudonymous documents, though the real name of each contestant was to be made known to the institute. Dan Miron has pointed out both the proliferation and the historical and psychological significance of the pseudonym in the earlier stages of Yiddish literature. In the latter context, the function of the pseudonym is to establish and, in Miron’s words, “keep the largest distance possible between his creative activity and his personality.” If he is writing an autobiography, the pseudonym serves to establish nonidentity between author and autobi-
graphical protagonist, an effect heightened of course if the autobiography is in the third person. With the YIVO autobiographies, the pseudonym has precisely the opposite function: it enables the writer to speak more effusively in and of the first person. Several of the autobiographers, in the letters accompanying their texts, state that they could never have been so candid in their confessional were it not for the cover of the pseudonym. I would thus argue that the YIVO autobiographies written in Yiddish, unabashedly confessional and defiantly first-person, actually constitute a unique and isolated phenomenon within the Yiddish literary historical context. Perhaps the reason for this is that, as noted above, the spiritual and intellectual sustenance of these autobiographers was not primarily derived from Yiddish (or Hebrew) literature. It goes without saying, of course, that the trajectory of Yiddish literature would have been very different had the great majority of this generation not been exterminated.

Youth and Jewish Youth: The Particular and the Universal

The relation between the particular and the universal is a topic that has vexed autobiographers from Rousseau to this day, and one that has vexed Jews, autobiographers or not, since their inception as a people. This issue was very much to the fore in Weinreich’s mind at the time of writing Der veg. Thus we find lengthy discussions under such rubrics as “The Individual and the Group,” “Universal and ‘Jewish’ Personality Traits,” “What’s the Use of Studying Individuals?,” “Ethnic Elements of Personality,” “Jewish Psychic Specificity,” and “Literature on Specific Jewish Abilities.” Weinreich was highly conscious of his membership in the trans-ethnic, trans-national community of humanist seekers for truth, as has been seen above in his posing of the analogy between the East European Jew and the African-American. Almost all of his scholarly citations in Der veg, as distinct from citations from the autobiographies themselves, are written in non-Jewish languages and do not treat Jewish themes; a curious mirror of the autobiographies themselves. Citizen of the world as he was, Weinreich was clearly committed to the cultivation and preservation of a specifically Jewish/Yiddishist secular culture in the Diaspora, specifically that of Eastern Europe. Another complicating factor, to put it mildly, was the ascendance of Hitlerian antisemitism in the 1930s. Weinreich “saw this with his own flesh,” as Job says: in the early 1930s he was rendered all but blind in one eye by a stone-throwing antisemitic student in Vilna. Thus, in writing of Jewish specificity, Weinreich takes great care to distance himself from...
any biologically based ethnic formulations. Der veg itself has an autobiographical aspect: Weinreich’s Jewish commitment, his hands-on approach to the dire predicament of Jewish “youth without a tomorrow” jostles uneasily with his universalist/humanist ideology. His discussion of “Science for Science vs. Science for Life” in Der veg is particularly awkward. Elsewhere in the book, Weinreich argues that because Thomas and Znaniecki’s The Polish Peasant, while dealing with a specific culture, should have marked a turning-point in American social sciences, why should not a study of Jewish youth be of equally universal import? This claim is surely correct—with the significant reservation that the book is written in Yiddish. Weinreich’s book should be reckoned as a classic in the sociopsychological study of youth, something that will only occur if and when the work is translated into English.

What then, if anything, emerges as specific to the condition of interwar Polish Jewish youth, from the evidence of these autobiographies?

One striking factor of the YIVO autobiographies, when viewed within the comparative context, is the young age of these writers. Autobiography is classically a genre of those who have, at least, attained the age of 50. One of the “golden rules” of the genre is that a satisfactory autobiography can only be written by one who is “nel mezzo cammin della nostra vita,” because only he or she can stand at a sufficient temporal remove and have sufficiently crystallized an identity to adjudicate the significance of past experience for the forging of the self. The YIVO autobiographies serve as striking refutation of this conventional wisdom. True, we do find in these documents a greater concern with the present and the future than that evinced by the older autobiographer, whose gaze is for the most part fixed on the past. Yet many of these works express a marked degree of self-understanding and a subtle appreciation for the dialectics of the formation of the self both through internal processes and through the pressure of external circumstance. In addition, many of these autobiographies evince a marked precociousness in terms not only of education but also of strength of character, a strong sense of personal identity, and, not least, sheer resilience in the face of unimaginable adversity. A great number of the autobiographers bewail the absence of childhood in their lives and the forced imposition of adult responsibilities upon their young shoulders. A disproportionate number of these autobiographers were deprived of one or both parents at an early age.

The precociousness evident in these documents is, I believe, not unrelated to the sociohistorical specificities of interwar Polish Jewry.
Quite simply, this generation of Jews was forced into premature adulthood. This growing old beyond one’s years arises above all from the experience of World War I, or of the havoc left in its wake. Again and again we read of ruined villages and towns, the sound of cannon fire, successive occupations of troops, flight, sickness, starvation, and teen prostitution as constituting the “childhood” years. In one of the autobiographies, the author, having provided a horrific account of the bloodshed and destruction he witnessed as a young boy, writes:

Each of us children formed his own impressions of the war based on his own perspective—where he was, what he experienced. It seems to me that the various experiences I’d had during the war somehow made me much tougher and more mature. At the same time, though, they left me broken. From earliest childhood, I had been taught to believe that killing a person is the most terrible of crimes, that shedding human blood is the most shameful deed possible. And then it was my fate to see, with my own eyes, dead bodies lying in the street like garbage, lying in their own blood as if it were dirty water. And furthermore, I could not understand why. This wound, perhaps the very first one on my pure and innocent soul, has still not healed completely.

This passage speaks directly to the experience not only of the author but also of numerous YIVO autobiographers.

Another aspect of these autobiographies that obviously speaks specifically to the Jewish condition is the overwhelming impact of anti-Semitism in shaping the Jewish identity of the youth of the period. In many of these autobiographies, the “choosing” of one’s Jewishness, to adopt Sartrean terminology, was directly associated with first-hand experience of Polish antisemitism. Thus Esther, who had previously composed and delivered not one but two orations to Pilsudski, in the town hall:

Relations between the Jewish and the Polish population had in the meantime deteriorated significantly. This too did not occur without making an impression on me. The loyal Polish patriot in me suffered and I, who was so tied to Poland with all the threads of my soul, now had to give up the cherished dream of Poles and Jews living together in harmony. . . . Daily, the newspapers brought fresh, grim news of the persecution of Jews. My belief in Poland’s “heart” darkened. . . . Now I began looking for a home for myself with others, which had to be Jewish. I realized that in the present situation Jews must strengthen themselves. To do this, I felt it would be necessary to learn the history of the Jews, acquaint myself with the Jewish poetry of the prophets, and study the ancient Jewish law. I countered the disparaging attitude of others with our spiritual values.
This testimony, it should be noted, comes not from one of assimilated background but from the daughter of a Gerer Hasid. In Der veg, Weinreich speaks of the first and second “attacks of Jewishness” in the psychological development of Polish-Jewish youth; “Jewishness,” here, constitutes the shock of awareness of belonging to a persecuted and despised minority.145 Deprived of the assurances of the theodicy of their forebears, these “attacks” must be met with various “compensations.”146 These compensations range from the positive—reaffirmation of Jewish loyalties, Jewish social activism, as with Esther—to the “neurotic” and the “psychotic.” Perhaps one such cathartic compensation may have been the laying of one’s heart bare in an autobiography. In the “psychotic” category, Weinreich mentions a mentally ill Jew he knew in Vilna who believed that he had established an independent Jewish kingdom in the city, that the soldiers were Jewish, all the streets had Jewish names, and so on.147

It remains only to comment briefly and in broad sweep on how these life-histories square with the depictions of childhood and youth of East European Jews as found in the published works of Hebrew and Yiddish writers. The YIVO autobiographies provide an invaluable supplement to the writings of the more-or-less established literary figures. If anything, they point to the historical authenticity of the latter—whether these are writing in autobiographical form or are drawing upon life experience in novelistic presentations. For example, the many depictions we have in the YIVO documents of the psychological duality occasioned by the contrast between the Polish gymnasium and the Jewish home are strongly reminiscent of the autobiographies of Dov Sadan. Some of the depictions of Jewish beggary and indigence could have come out of the pages of Abramovitz. The destruction wrought by World War I supplements the abundance of memoiristic and novelistic material extant on this topic, in particular the works of Shmuel Ansky, Israel Rabon, and Oyzer Varshavsky. The experience of orphanhood is frequently depicted in terms that call strongly to mind Hayim Bialik’s treatments of this topic, notably the Yatmut cycle. Depictions of yeshiva life provide nuance to those we have in the works of Smolenskin, Abramovitz, Khaim Grade, Bialik, Michah Yosef Berdichevsky, and Bal Makhshoves. The themes of the usurpation of Jewish childhood, and the equation of the Jewish child with an old man motif, are so prevalent in Hebrew and Yiddish literature from the late nineteenth century as to constitute a topos. The atmosphere of political debates and meetings provides a fascinating supplement to the often more ideologically engage memoiristic material on this topic by the likes of Vladimir Medem, Chaim Zhitlowsky, and Mordechai Berman. Depictions of the
destruction wrought upon the Jews by World War I supplement and confirm those of Ansky, Gershom Shofman, Singer, et al. And, not least, there is the gender aspect in the depictions we have seen here of the experiences, in particular, of the daughter of a rabbi in a literature abundant with sons of rabbis. Devorah Baron, the Hebrew writer of the Second Aliyah and the daughter of a rabbi, is the exception that proves the rule, and it was precisely this exceptionality that contributed to her aura.

But, above all, both the published literature referred to above and the YIVO autobiographies demonstrate that authenticity is in part literary and “literariness” part authentic. Whereas literature is drawn from life and lives, the reverse is also true, especially in the sphere of the representation of the self.148

“I paced the floor,” writes another young reader-become-writer, also a member of a disadvantaged minority, in his recollection of the liberation afforded through the acquisition of literary language:

knowing that all I possessed were words and dim knowledge that my country had showed me no examples of how to live a human life. . . . In the front room of my apartment our radio was playing, pouring a white man’s voice into my home, a voice that hinted of a coming war that would consume millions of lives. . . . I picked up my pencil and held it over a sheet of white paper, but my feelings stood in the way of my words. Well, I would wait, day and night, until I knew what to say. Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of building a vast unity, I wanted 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.149

Notes

Except where indicated, citations from the YIVO autobiographies have been taken from translations prepared for the forthcoming anthology of these autobiographical documents, to be published by Yale University Press, under the general editorship of Jeffrey Shandler and with introductions by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Marcus Moseley, and Michael Stanislawski. An abridged and altered version of the current article is to appear as part of an introduction to this volume. When I have adapted the translations, this is indicated. The translator’s name is always given. Because the anthology of
autobiographies has not yet appeared, I have not provided pagination for
my citations. I cite only the archival number of the text and the pseudonym
of the author. YA indicates YIVO Archives; YAAC indicates the YA Autobiog-
raphies Collection.

All English translations of quotations from other foreign-language works
are my own.

1 Leo Tolstoy, *Childhood, Boyhood
and Youth*, trans. Louise and Ayl-
er Maude (London, 1969), 58.
2 S. Y. Abramovitz (Mendele
Moykher Sforem), *Dos
vintsfingerl*, in *Di yidishe
folkbibliotek*, ed. Sholem
Aleichem (Kiev, 1888), 52.
3 S. Y. Abramovitz, *Beyamim hahem*
(1894), trans. Raymond B.
Scheindlin, in R. Wisse, ed.,
*A Shetel and Other Yiddish Novellas*
4 This citation is taken from
“Yezhik Tomszow,” YAAC #3701
(1934), trans. Elinor Robinson.
5 As cited by V. Erlich, *Russian For-
malism: History-Doctrine*
(The Hague, 1965), 260.
6 See Ph. Lejeune,
*L’autobiographie en France*
(Paris, 1971), and R. Coe, *When the
Grass Was Taller: Autobiography
and the Experience of Childhood*
(New Haven, 1984), esp. 1–41.
7 See A. Wachtel, *The Battle for
Childhood: Creation of a Romantic
Myth* (Stanford, 1990), 7–58,
and G. Williams, *Tolstoy’s Child-
8 See O. Binshiotk,
“Derinerungen vegn Mendele,”
in *Mendele un zayn tsveyt*, ed. A.
Gurshtayn (Moscow, 1940), 62–
91.
9 See Wachtel, *The Battle for Child-
hood*, 131–52.
10 See Rolland’s panegyric to
Tolstoy in his *Tolstoy*, trans. B.
Miall (New York, 1911), 1–6.
For another Jewish adolescent
from a very different time and
place likewise intoxicated by
Jean Christophe, see S. Yizhar,
*Migdamat* (Tel Aviv, 1992), esp.
180–82.
11 Romain Rolland, *Jean Christophe*
12 A. Harefuler, YAAC #3598
(1939), trans. Dobrochna Dyrcz-
Freeman.
13 See S. Schwarzchild, “J.P. Sartre
as Jew,” *Modern Judaism* 3, no. 1
14 J. P. Sartre, *The War Diaries*
(November 1939/March 1940),
trans. Q. Hoare (New York,
1984), 23.
15 M. Weinreich, *Der veg tsu undser
yugnt: Yesodes, metodn, problemen
fun yidisher yugnt-forschung*
(Vilna, 1935), 148 n. 29.
16 Ibid.
17 Forget-me-not, YAAC #3539
(1934), trans. Ch. Mlotek.
(Tel Aviv, 1978–85), 1: 95.
19 See Moyshe Kligsberg, *Di yidishe
yugnt-bavegung in poyn in tsveyn
beysde velv-milkhomes*, in *Shstudies
vegn yidn in poyn in (1919–1939),
ed. Sh. Fishman (New York,
1974), on the “Takhles
printsip,” 140–42.
analogy between the African-American experience and that of the “Warsaw niggers,” as the Polish-Jewish poet Anthony Slonimsky referred to the assimilated Jews of the city. See ibid., 190–91.

34 Yedies fun YIVO, Mar.–Apr. 1939, 3.

35 Weinreich, Der veg, 3.


37 Ibid.


40 Ibid., 70.

41 Sh. Niger, Shmuesn vegn literatur: Ershter tayl (New York, 1922), 95f. Ralph Ellison makes very much the same point with respect to the lack of autobiographical consciousness in the African-American South in his 1945 essay “Richard Wright’s Blues” included in his Shadow and Act (New York, 1995), 77–95.

YAAC #237, as cited by Weinreich, Der veg, 298. As with Kligsberg, Weinreich does not cite the date of the autobiographies he cites. He draws, however, only upon the texts submitted for the 1932 and 1934 competitions.

A fitting photographic accompaniment to these texts would be Marek Web’s beautifully and lovingly edited album of the photographs of Alter Kacyzne. See A. Kacyzne, Poyln: Jewish Life in the Old Country (New York, 1995).

Esther, YAAC.


Esther, YAAC.

See Yedies fun YIVO, Nov. 1934, 13.

Yedies fun YIVO, Jan.–Mar. 1934, 4–7.

Ibid.

Yedies fun YIVO, Aug.–Sept. 1934, 2.

Yedies fun YIVO, Nov. 1934, 12.

Ibid., 12–13.

See Yedies fun YIVO, Nov.–Dec. 1938, Mar.–Apr. 1939. Kligsberg, “Child and Adolescent Behaviour,” 3–4, writes that the three contests yielded about 620 documents, 410 of which found their way to the YIVO Archives in New York. These numbers should be revised, however, in light of recent discoveries in post-Soviet Vilna by Marek Web, head archivist of the YIVO Institute in New York. Web writes, following his inspection of extant YIVO archival material in Vilna in 1989–90: “There are a number of items from the important collection of autobiographies of Jewish youth in Poland. But these newly discovered autobiographies are far from filling the lacunae in the original collection, in which there are still missing some 300 autobiographies (the New York YIVO possessed 375 of the approximately 900 that were collected in Vilna).” See M. Web, Yidish dokumentare mekoyrim in vilne, in YIVO bleter, naye serie, band 1, ed. D. Fishman (New York, 1991), 283.


Yedies fun YIVO, Aug.–Sept. 1936, 8.

Weinreich in his introduction to S. Schoenfeld, Zikhroynes fun a shriftzetser, published as one of the “YIVO Personal Document Series,” (New York, 1936), 5. It is not entirely clear to me what Weinreich means by “personal documents”—more autobiographies in other categories? Or the various personal documents solicited by the branches and sub-branches of the organization, as in the preceding quotation? See also Web, as cited in n. 55.


See the editorial notice, YIVO bleter, May–June 1943, 357–58.

Niger, Shmuesn vegn literatur, 97.
62 Weinreich, *Der veg*, 137.
63 Heinrich Elsky, YAAC #232, p. 100, as cited by Weinreich, *Der veg*, 137.
64 Dziecko Szczescia, YAAC #147, in Weinreich, *Der veg*, 138.
65 Gutenberg, YAAC #241, in Weinreich, *Der veg*, 139.
66 Y.B., YAAC #292, in Weinreich, *Der veg*, 139.
67 Hamithadesh, YAAC #281, in Weinreich, *Der veg*, 139.
68 J. Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Popular Culture* (Garden City, N.Y., nd), 83–84.
71 This is the motto with which Sholem Aleichem prefaces his autobiographical *Funem yarid* (New York, 1925), 15.
72 As cited by Lejeune, *L'autobiographie*, 158.
73 Ibid., 52.
76 Tor, YAAC #3752, trans. E. Robinson.
77 YAAC #5609 (1932).
79 This becomes especially apparent in the reading of Lejeune’s masterfully assembled “Anthology of Autobiographical Facts” in *L’autobiographie*.
81 See Moseley, “Jewish Autobiography in Eastern Europe.”
82 Kligsberg, *Yugnt-bavegung*, 172n.
84 Kligsberg, *Di yidishe yugnt-bavegung*, 170.
86 Kligsberg, *Di yidishe yugnt-bavegung*, 165. See also the fine and meticulously documented survey of this topic by Z’ev Gries, *Sefer vesippur bensh hahasidut: Min habesht ad menahem mendl mikotsk* (Tel Aviv, 1992), index, 148, under *Beysmedresh*; and see Agnon on the function of the “local,” its library, and their relation to the *Beysmedresh* in his *Sippur peschat* in his *Kappot hamanal* (Tel Aviv, 1962), 65–68. See also R. Ertel, *Le Shtetl: La bourgade juive de Pologne* (Paris, 1982), which provides further citations from the YAAC that corroborate and sup-
plement Kligsberg’s commentary; see esp. on books and the library, 286–93. Ertel’s chapter “Culture et contre-culture de la jeunesse” provides invaluable sociopsychological background to the YAAC.

87 YAAC, as cited by Kligsberg, *Yugnt-bavegung*, 165 (emphasis in the original).

88 Kligsberg, *Di yidishe yugnt-bavegung*, 174. The practice of producing handwritten journals that were then affixed to the wall was not uncommon among “enlightened” Jewish youth of this period and previously. Y. H. Brenner and U. N. Gnessin, for example, edited such journals at the turn of the century. See also the depiction of “A Handwritten Hebrew Journal” of 1869, contributed to the YIVO library, in *Yedies fun YIVO*, Mar.–Apr. 1939, 20–21.


90 Ibid., 174.


92 See Emtepa, YAAC #3792 (1939), trans. J. Weeks.

93 Esther, YAAC.


95 A. Harefuler, YAAC.

96 A Seventeen-Year-Old Girl from Vilna, YAAC #3618 (1934), trans. M. Moseley.

97 Ibid.

98 Eter, YAAC #3764 (1939), trans. Andrzej Tymowski.

99 Anon., YAAC #3675 (1934), trans. J. Weeks.


101 Weinreich, *Der veg*, 291.

102 See, for example, Weinreich’s pioneering *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikt: Fun di onheybn biz Mendele Moyker Sforern* (Vilna, 1928).

103 Weinreich, *Der veg*, 140.

104 Ibid., 142. However, Weinreich’s number of citations of these literary documents—in a book that averages several citations per page—does not seem particularly remarkable to me.

105 Ibid., 145.

106 Lejeune, *L’autobiographie*, 47. Lejeune is referring here to the eighteenth-century pseudo-autobiographical apprentice novel, of which *Jean Christophe* is a late variant.

107 See *Yedies fun YIVO*, Mar.–Apr. 1939, 19.


109 See D. Miron, *Bodedim bemoadam: Lidyoqnah shel harepuliqah hasifrutit bithilat hameah haesrim* (Tel Aviv, 1987), 399–400. Miron discerns a dismissive, sarcastic attitude
on behalf of Hebrew belletristics at the turn of the century toward those with doctorates, especially those who proclaimed their well-earned academic laurels, such as Y. Klausner. I have not found a parallel to this in the Yiddish/Yiddishist ambience. From my own personal conversations with original members of the Vilna YIVO, Weinreich’s aura was augmented by the fact that he held a doctorate from Marburg. Even his markedly teutonic rigor and punctiliousness was respected.


111 See Weinreich, Der veg, 8.


113 See Siegfried Bernfeld, “Vegn der posheter menersher tsaytung,” in YIVO bleter, vol. 11 (Vilna, 1937), 131–54. Bernfeld, a close associate of Freud, was an important figure in the history of the German-Austrian Jewish youth movement in the interwar period. His study, Traub und Tradition im jugendaralter: Kulturpsychologische Studien an Tagebuchern (Leipzig, 1931), is cited by Weinreich in Der veg, 151 n. 132. On the mutual antipathy and mistrust between Freudian psychology and autobiography, see Lejeune, L’autobiographie, 91–104. One 22-year-old youth makes note of the tension between the life sciences and expression of the self: “There are so many fields of learning these days. There is psychology, an established sociology, economics. Why do these fields not strive to create a life for the individual? Why do they not give clear answers regarding his life, which is so bitter and full of suffering? I have read much sociology and economics, but neither has changed my life at all” (Der shturman, YAAC #3707 (1939), trans. D. Soyer). This author, it should be noted, is an avid reader of imaginative literature.


115 Weinreich, Der veg, 149.

116 Ibid., 299.


118 Zetar, YAAC #3582, trans. R. Borow.

119 Weinreich, Der veg, 4; see also, for example, 291 n. 168, where Weinreich sees fit to explain the Yiddish neologisms of his invention for the terms “integration” and “adjustment.”

120 Kligsberg, Yugne-bevegung, 171.


122 See Sh. Niger, Di tsveyshprakhkayt fun undzerer literatur (Detroit, 1941), 124–34.

[49]
123 G. Pipe, YAAC #3770 (1934), trans. D. Soyer (translation slightly emended by me).

124 A. Gryna, YAAC.

125 A. Harefuler, YAAC.

126 Esther, YAAC.


128 A. Litvak, *Vos geveen: Etyudn un zikhroynes* (Vilna, 1925), 98. On the persistence and tenacity of what D. Miron terms this “dim sense” of “abnormality” of Yiddish as a literary medium that “persisted for a long time, until World War I and even later,” see Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1973), 21–22. I am always reminded, when reading depictions such as those of Litvak and many others, of Moliere’s “bourgeois gentleman’s” delighted astonishment at the fact that he is speaking prose.


130 Ibid., 17–18.

131 For an overview of Yiddish memoir literature, see N. Mayzel, *Tsurikbln un perspektiv* (New York, 1951), 92–118.


133 Sholem Aleichem, *From the Fair*, trans. C. Leviant (New York, 1985), 4. And on this passage, see Miron, *Traveler*, 85–86; chapters 2 and 3, aptly titled “A Language as Caliban” and “The Mimic Writer and His ‘Little Jew,’” respectively, are directly relevant to this theme.

134 Miron, *Traveler*, 16, and see index under “pen-name.”

135 See the English summary of topics in Weinreich, *Der veg*, 7–8.

136 This is a major theme in Sadan’s portrait of Weinreich in *Heymishe ksoven*.

137 See Dawidowicz, *From That Time and Place*, 82. In an uncharacteristically personal note, Weinreich attests obliquely to this experience in *Der veg*, 204.


139 Ibid., 287–91.

140 Ibid., 284–86.


142 Germane to this issue is Weinreich’s claim, basing himself upon H. Rosenthal “Der Beginn der Pubertät bei Jüdischen Kindern,” a 1932 essay he cites on p. 201, that it is “a physiological fact” that Jews attain sexual maturity a year earlier, on average, than non-Jews. See *Der veg*, 69.

143 Anon., YAAC #3845 (1932), trans. (beautifully) by F. Mohrer.

144 Esther, YAAC. This, and other such depictions in the autobiographies, find a curious parallel in A. Gorz’s Sartrean-inspired autobiography *The Traitor*.
trans. R. Howard, with a foreword by Sartre (New York, 1959), esp. 206–15. Gorz is a half-Jew who fled his native Austria when a teenager after the Anschluss.


146 Ibid., 149–243.

147 Ibid., 229 n. 84.

148 I paraphrase here the formulation of I. Paperno, in her Chernyshevsky and the Age of Reason: A Study in the Semiotics of Behavior (Stanford, 1988), 1.

149 Wright, Black Boy, 452–53.