

TEN YEARS IN THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS OF YIVO

by Yeshayahu TAUB, Melbourne

After many years of living and studying in Warsaw, I later found a teaching position in the province. But I was happy to leave for a work in Kutno, because it was the famous and idealized "*shtetl*" with a ramified and beautifully developed social Jewish life, which was widely renowned among Polish Jews.

The job there as a teacher did not satisfy me very much, but for that reason I enjoyed myself in the warmer environment of friends of YIVO in Vilnius – and I want to tell a little about that.

The Yiddish Scientific Institute was less than 5 years old at the time. In many countries, reconnaissance work and various actions for YIVO have been carried out. But the foundation, which was established in Vilnius, only received its imprimatur after Jewish cultural workers and organizations had fought for subsidies in the communities and city councils, over many cities in Poland.

Kutno was one of the first to introduce a permanent annual subsidy for YIVO – both from the Jewish community and from the city administration. A "Society of Friends of YIVO" was established and even legalized with difficulty in Kutno, and at the first YIVO Conference in 1929 in Vilnius, a delegate from Kutno (Zalman Kirsztajn) was already present.

Among the founders of the "Society of Friends" are: the aforementioned conference delegate Zalman Kirsztajn, the community secretary Yoel Borowski, Herman and Eva Kirszbaum – leaders of the "*Bund*", Mordechai Tyger and others. The main work initially revolved around the material assistance and actions for the center in Vilnius.

Upon my arrival began an intense activity at the "Society of Friends of YIVO" in Kutno. An ethnographic-folkloric collector's circle has been established in the name

of Sh. Ansky¹, under the direction of a recent teacher – an old acquaintance, collector and collaborator of the YIVO Scripts.

About 20 active members have met regularly every Wednesday evening, holding scientific meetings with lectures, discussions, discussing various instructions and procedures on how to protect, retrieve, process and send to Vilnius all kinds of materials and ethnographic material. Each of us has always carried a good and beautifully bound notebook in our bags (especially made for the YIVO Society by the famous Kutno binder-artist Metal), and considered it a necessity, a whole week, between one Wednesday and the next. Write, record and record at every opportunity all kinds of songs, languages, customs, curses, local words, jokes, legends or addresses of different people and places, where you will find historical objects, documents, pictures, rare books etc.

At each meeting, the individual works were sorted out and then sent to Vilnius. There wasn't a month when we did not have to carry a large pack or box of answers to various YIVO surveys, collections of poems, sayings, legends, current publications and books for the Bibliographic Center and YIVO Library, rare theater posters and pictures of past performances of local dramatic circles, old Chanukah lamps, spices, tobacco pots and hundreds of other items.

I will never forget the hardships, sufferings and torments we endured when getting them out and sending them by the train to Vilnius in a large, heavy iron and old-fashioned box, which used to stand for years in the courtroom of the Kutno Rabbi, Mr. Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk, a grandson of the famous *Tzaddik* Rabbi Yehoshua Kutner and son-in-law of Rabbi Shmuel Borensztajn, who was a son of Rabbi Abraham Sochaczewer, the student of Rabbi Mendele Kocker. The ornate and rare suitcase later occupied a prominent and prominent place in the YIVO Museum on Wiwulski Street in Vilnius.

There was in Kutno an old YIVO-friend and devoted collector – Elbaum. He once received with joy, from an old Jewish woman, an heirloom dress from her grandmother, made of black velvet and silk, with beautiful handiwork and rare artistic stitching – of over a hundred years old. This was an important contribution to the history of Jewish clothing in Vilnius, a subject on which an YIVO-aspirant worked and wrote a treatise.

Among the collectors was a chassidic fellow from the *Poalei Agudat Israel*, Yitzhak Kraut, who devoted much time, effort and trouble to collecting in his circles various interesting folkloric materials. His submissions often appeared in issues of "Yediot of YIVO", which have always been used in the various YIVO editions.

The "Society of Friends" and through it the YIVO itself, were an important and honorable factor in the cultural life of the Jewish community in Kutno. Large-scale

fundraising and the distribution of YIVO spending have always been carried out with the greatest success, and the Jewish community has appealed to all who bore the stamp of YIVO, with the utmost respect and politeness.

Falek Halpern, Dr. Gerszoni and Dr. Max Wajnreich have, in their honor and by themselves while in Kutno on a mission from YIVO, refreshed the lively interest, which our city has always shown to every call of YIVO.

There was an incident with a census on December 1931. The Polish semi-fascist *Sanation* government then deliberately omitted from the census sheets the rubric of nationality – for obvious reasons. Who is out to fight for the Yiddish language (which had a rubric) even though Jewish? The YIVO Society in Kutno. We have printed, with the Gajst printing press, a great appeal to the Jewish population, that everyone should remember to indicate *Jewish* on the day of the census and thereby mark their nationality. However, the posters were confiscated and its author (the writer of these lines) kept under close watch by the police, who wanted to find out who compiled it.

Our YIVO had another task: lectures by renowned lecturers on scientific topics, such as: Leo Finkelsztajn, Noah Prylucki and others. The events were attended by hundreds of people and the great "Polonia Hall" or the Firefighter Theater² were always full.

I remember a case when two Kutno residents had a dispute over the meaning of a Yiddish word, during which one eventually abused the other... they came to YIVO as the arbiter – and have accepted the judgment with humility. I myself was once summoned on the eve of Yom Kippur to the Kutno Court as an expert and specialist in deciphering and translating a Yiddish manuscript of a trade agreement between the well-known millers, the *Szlajfers*, who had a money trial among themselves.

There has not been a single manifestation of a social or cultural character in Kutno that the YIVO did not take part in. Among our friends we had people from all political directions and parties, from all classes and strata of the population – old and young; There were also a significant number of conscious and educated women.

We have collected not only historical and ancient documents, but every printed Yiddish word, or about Jews – in other languages. We have strived to collect every crumb and scrap that needed to be preserved and contributed to the perpetuation of our lives in Kutno. We wanted to save her from destruction, catastrophe and oblivion.

Then came the terrible flood that wiped it all out, along with the Jewish life in Kutno. All that was so dear, dear, and close to us disappeared. And on the cemetery of Kutno Jewry – the Yizkor book – the "Society Friends of YIVO" and its loyal devoted bearers must be placed on a monument. They must not be forgotten!

¹ TN: Shloyme Zanol Rappoport (Chashniki Belarus October 27, 1863 – Otwok, Poland November 8, 1920), Yiddish writer.

² TN: Kutno's theater was built in an old firefighter station.