“For the Love of Money: The Strashun Library Settlement and its Aftermath”

Introduction

Common popular opinion and common scholarly consensus converge regarding Yiddish Scientific Institute’s (YIVO), headquartered in Vilna before the Holocaust, holding of and claim to the vast remnants of the great public Jewish library of Vilna, the Strashun Library: YIVO had rescued Strashun, post-World War II, as a displaced library from the same city; YIVO continues to extend such kindness in hosting—and now maintaining its “Vilna Collection,” the bulk of which is the orphaned Strashun.

However, a basic reading of the stamped branding of a number of Mattityahu Strashun’s books, the founder of the Strashun Library, reveal a far more complex, if not more problematic material history than that presented by YIVO. To follow the trail of at least five different book stamps reveals a twisted, contradictory genealogy: (1) Mattityahu Strashun’s personal stamp, (2) the Strashun Public Library stamp, (3) the YIVO library stamp, (4) a stamp memorializing YIVO’s donation of the book to the Central Rabbinic Library at Hekhel Shlomo, and (5) a stamp memorializing Tzvi Harkavy’s donation of the book to the Central Rabbinic Library at Hekhel Shlomo.

Suggesting as much need not diminish the care and kindness proffered by YIVO in preserving a cultural jewel; it only suggests that the monolithic and presumed heroism on YIVO’s part be called into question. Of consequence, of course, in knowing YIVO’s entire orchestration—from its very inception to the present day—is the rightful resting place—and accessible forum—for the Strashun Library to reside.
Certainly, YIVO played a critical role in petitioning for and coordinating the transfer of Strashun to YIVO-New York, along with the surviving YIVO-Vilna library. What a careful examination of the historical and somewhat secreted record reveals is that YIVO’s initial title of ownership of Strashun was manipulated at its very inception, and ultimately enabling a successful refusal of Strashun’s rightful heirs to their material inheritance.

A Short History of Obfuscation

In July 1947, YIVO received four hundred and twenty crates of materials from the Offenbach Archival Depot. The shipment was comprised of YIVO’s materials, books, newspapers, and brochures, as well as a consequential collection of books from the Strashun Library of Vilna. Indeed, while not originally YIVO property, the Strashun collection, with 26,000 books, comprised ninety-five percent of the books and thirty percent of the entire 1947 shipment, representing the largest number of pre-Holocaust books restituted to the YIVO library. Through the addition of the Strashun Library, the American YIVO Rabbinic holdings swelled considerably in a significant historic and generic area that had been heretofore lacking.

The acquisition by YIVO of Strashun was terribly convenient. Max Weinreich, in a letter to Lucy Schildkret in 1947, proclaimed the incredible significance of the transfer of the Strashun remnants to YIVO—and Weinreich was certainly aware of the central importance and wide recognition of the Strashun Library as one of the most storied and revered institutions of Jewish Vilna. Though an objective shift in the YIVO catalogue, the value of this acquisition to YIVO leadership at the time cannot be understated. However, while the Strashun Library may have been “terribly important” to YIVO, to date, it has never provided a full legal and historic
accounting regarding the post-Holocaust inclusion and acquisition of the Strashun Library within those 420 crates.

YIVO’s reticence to discuss the full details of the Strashun Library transfer is not for lack of opportunity—in fact, YIVO has strategically shared and mostly hidden this problematic history. In 2001, YIVO mounted an exhibition, drawn entirely from its holdings, devoted to the Strashun Library and its founder, Mattityahu Strashun.1 Aviva Astrinksy, YIVO Head Librarian, both in her introduction to the exhibition’s companion volume and essay, “A Brief History of the Strashun Library,” describes the Strashun Library’s provenance in broad strokes. The Strashun Library begins with Mattityahu Strashun and his philanthropic endowment. At this death in 1885, he bequeathed funds and his private library to the Vilna Jewish community earmarked to build and maintain a Jewish public library. The library was a success, and on the eve of the Holocaust, contained over 50,000 books and was among the most trafficked in Jewish Vilna.2

Up until this point in the Strashun Library’s history, YIVO was entirely absent in a “remote” neighborhood that was “a fifteen-minute walk from the antiquated Jewish quarter [and the Strashun Library] … with its only close Jewish neighbor the playing field of the maccabi sports club,”—a neighboring institution in Vilna, at best. 3 It was only the Nazi invasion of Vilna in 1941 which brought YIVO and the Strashun Library together. In Vilna, Alfred Rosenberg’s special unit dedicated to the plunder and looting of important Jewish historic and cultural items, Einsatztab Riechsleiter Rosenberg (ERR), forced Jews to inspect and select the

1 Mattityahu Strashun 1817 – 1885: Scholar, Leader, & Book Collector, (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, [2001]).
most valuable items for shipment to Frankfurt, Germany, for inclusion in Rosenberg’s institute that preserved Jewish culture a hoped for exterminated Jewish culture. It is here in Astrinsky’s report that the two libraries meet. The Nazi’s designated the YIVO building one of the two sites for the collection, inspection, and selection site “for ransacked Jewish libraries and archives from Vilna.” According to Astrinsky, the Strashun Library was among the “ransacked Jewish libraries.” Once in the YIVO building, “the Strashun books were crated and shipped by rail to Germany.”

Astrinsky’s “Brief History” also discusses the ERR’s activities in Vilna and that the Strashun Library and YIVO were looted. But beyond suffering the same fate, no other relationship is mentioned. In Astrinsky’s second telling, then, the two libraries’ connection only occurred when the books were amalgamated into a single building at the Offenbach Archival Depot in Frankfurt where, “in 1945, the American army discovered three million Jewish books,” and “among them 25,000 books from the Strashun Library collection and 15,000 from the YIVO

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4 Aviva Astrinsky, “A Brief History of the Strashun Library,” Mattityahu Strashun 1817 – 1885, iv. There are a number of inaccuracies in her description. Astrinsky’s is incorrect that the American’s discovered three million books at the Offenbach Archival Depot. Instead, the Offenbach Archival Depot functioned as a collection point for most of the books the American’s recovered. The books themselves were uncovered all over Germany, and sent to the Offenbach Archival Depot for sorting and identification. By 1949, when the Offenbach Archival Depot was closed, more than three million books were processed at the Offenbach Archival Depot. See Robert G. Waite, “Returning the Jewish Cultural Property: The Handling of Books Looted by the Nazis in the American Zone of Occupation, 1945 to 1952,” Libraries and Culture 37, no. 3 (2002): 215; Michael J. Kurtz, America and the Return of Nazi Contraband: The Recovery of Europe’s Cultural Treasures (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 136-46 (discussing the multiple collection points within the American zone in Germany); Dov Schidorsky, Burning Scrolls & Flying Letters, (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 2008), 222-25 (detailing the sorting and identification process at the Offenbach Archival Depot). Among the earliest books from the YIVO library in Vilna were discovered in Hugen, Germany and eventually sent to the Offenbach Archival Depot. Nancy Sinkoff, “From the Archives, Lucy S. Dawidowicz & the Restitution of Jewish Cultural Property,” American Jewish History, 2016, 126.
collection.” While in the first iteration, the Strashun Library resided within YIVO’s own
YIVO’s, here, the sum total of the libraries’ bond is inside the same building as millions of other
books. From hereon in both accounts remain consistently in lockstep: the books recovered from
the Strashun Library are sent to YIVO in New York.

Astrinsky’s telling is abstracted at best and riddled with absences at worst. A review of
the wartime history of the Strashun Library—told without YIVO’s meta-narrative—tells a far
different story. The Strashun Library was never moved to the YIVO building. On the contrary,
while never fulfilled, the Nazis contemplated moving the YIVO library to the Strashun Library
collection point. YIVO’s building was outside of the ghetto, and the Nazis’ preferred to locate all
of the Jewish libraries within the ghetto. The Nazis abandoned this plan because the size of the
YIVO collection made impractical such a move. But there was no communal residence while

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5 The recovered portion of the Strashun Library numbered 26,511 and not 25,000. Offenbach
Group 260, box 262 (hereafter NA, RG, and box number).
YIVO recovered fewer than 15,000 books of its own books from the Offenbach Archival Depot.
260, box 262. In August of 1948, another sixty books were sent to New York. August 19, 1948,
In 1949, YIVO received an additional 3,379 books. But, these were not from YIVO’s library.
Instead, they were received through the Jewish Reconstruction Corporation, Inc. (JCR) and the
American’s designation of the JCR to disperse heirless books from the Offenbach Archival
Depot. Herman Dicker, Of Learning & Libraries: The Seminary at One Hundred,
6 The two citations tagged to her telling are unhelpful, neither discuss the Strashun Library’s
transfer to New York and focus on the return of the YIVO library from Vilna to New York. See
Astrinsky, “A Brief History,” iv, n.1 (citing David E. Fishman, “Embers Plucked from the Fire:
The Rescue of Jewish Cultural Treasures in Vilna, (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish
Fishman’s later treatments do not either provide details regarding the Strashun Library and its
shipment to New York. David Fishman, Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture, (Pittsburg: University
the libraries remained in Vilna. Consequently, the only intersection between the two was underneath the same roof at the massive Offenbach Archival Depot.

A cursory reading of Astrinsky’s narratives, while not perfectly aligned, seemingly provides a continuous history of the Strashun Library, from its inception to its current location in New York. Absent from either rendition, however, is the critical step in provenance: the legal means which granted YIVO title to the otherwise independent Strashun Library. Nevertheless, in emphasizing an event that brought the two in proximity seems to be sufficient for the claiming of Strashun Library’s title.

The Strashun Library exhibit in 2001 is one very late example of YIVO’s obfuscating the origins of Strashun in New York. In fact, such calculated elision seemed to have emerged in 1947, when YIVO engaged in a scheme of deception and concealment to persuade the Americans that YIVO was entitled to the Strashun Library. Knowing full well that Americans would be unaware of other possible narratives, YIVO fabricated an entire history to create the

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8 YIVO’s online book catalog also suffers from a dearth of details, simply stating that “[t]he Strashun Collection, along with the YIVO Vilna collections, were liberated by the American Army, and repatriated to YIVO in New York in April 1947. See, e.g., http://search.cjh.org:1701/primo_library/libweb/action/display.do?tabs=detailsTab&ct=display&fn=search&doc=CJH_ALEPH000006060&index=1&recIds=CJH_ALEPH000006060&recIds=0&elementId=0&renderMode=poppedOut&displayMode=full&frbrVersion=&frbrSourceidDisplay=frbrSourceidDisplay=frbrSourceidDisplay=frbrSourceidDisplay=CJH_ALEPH&frbrIssnDisplay=&dset=1&frbrRecordsSource=Primo+Local&mode=Basic&vid=beta&lastPag=&rfinGrp=frbr&tab=default_tab&frbrJtitleDisplay=&vl(6137366UI1)=all_items&dtmp=147932754869&frbg=95602788&lastPagIndex=1&frbrSrt=date&frbrEissnDisplay=scp.scps=scope%3A%28CJH%29&cs=frb&fctV=95602788&srt=rank&fctN=facet_frbrgroupid&dum=true&vl(freeText0)=strashun%20collection.

The lack of the recorded history of the Strashun Library continues here: https://vilnacollections.yivo.org/Strashun-Collection.

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illusion of ownership of the Strashun Library. Without an independent method of verification, the Americans in post-war Germany were entirely dependent upon YIVO’s version of events. The lies changed depending upon what the evolving requirements were necessary to sway the relevant authorities. Initially, YIVO only suggested a tenuous connection between it and the Strashun Library, which evolved into a counter-factual deception strategy to post-war German and American authorities to ensure that it would receive and retain the Strashun Library. Ultimately, YIVO’s deception reached its pinnacle when the two libraries had effected a legally sanctioned merger, with YIVO absorbing the Strashun Library.9

Even after the Strashun Library reached New York, YIVO continued to obscure the basis for its title to the Strashun Library, and this deception continues to this day. Because of YIVO’s highly attenuated claim to the Strashun Library, YIVO has good reason to avoid clearly chronicling the background of the Strashun Library and its journey from Vilna to New York.10

9 Max Weinreich to Captain Isaac Bencovitz, director, Offenbach Archival Depot, July 2, 1946, box 51, folder 9, Lucy S. Dawidowicz Papers, P—675, American Jewish Historical Society, New York, N.Y. & Boston, Mass. (herefore noted as box #, folder #, Dawidowicz Papers). Max Weinreich to Seymour Pomrenze, February 14, 1947, P—675, box 52, folder 1 (Weinreich asserts that the Strashun Library was linked with the YIVO library because an unfulfilled plan to condense all of the Vilna libraries into a single library, which according to Weinreich, “No one had any doubt that the center should be at YIVO.” Weinreich’s “proof” of that the plan was in its final stage, was the Nazi’s treatment of the two libraries during the timeframe that the Nazis were plundering the two libraries.); Julius Uveeler to Seymour Pomrenze, June 5, 1947, NA RG 260, box 2 (Uveeler provides that due to the deteriorating conditions attributable to the war, the trustees of the Strashun Library “approached the YIVO Executive Board with a request for a legal merger.” YIVO granted that request “in October 1939 and a written agreement was drawn up to that effect and duly signed.” Conveniently, Uveeler notes that all trustees of the Strashun Library were no longer living in June 1947 to confirm his tale.).

10 This paper takes no position regarding the legitimacy of YIVO legal and/or moral claim to the Strashun Library. Indeed, under certain circumstance, during the post-World War II timeframe, restitution of Jewish cultural property through illegal means was permissible. Indeed, the Strashun Library may be one of those instances. Lisa Moses Leff, *The Archive Thief: The Man Who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust*, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Gish Amit, *Ex-Libris: Chronicles of Theft, Preservation, &
YIVO’s best efforts to escape legal scrutiny were tried in the late 1950s, when it was approached by an heir to Strashun and presented with the opportunity to disgorge the Strashun Library and restitute the library to an appropriate home. Still, YIVO persevered in its claim to the Strashun Library through a settlement that avoided any broader publicity regarding YIVO’s ownership of the Strashun Library. Consequently, the absence of specifics regarding the Strashun Library has hampered research into the history of YIVO’s receipt of this historic library and, to date, “[t]he full story of the transfer of non-YIVO Vilna materials to the New York City YIVO has not yet been told.”

The Strashun Library in the Immediate Aftermath of World War II

In 1945, books from YIVO’s Vilna library that the Nazis plundered were first discovered and identified in the American zone. By this time, the YIVO headquarters had moved from Vilna to New York, where many of the surviving key European YIVO personnel had found sanctuary. YIVO in New York, immediately upon learning of the discovery, requested that the Americans restitute those items to New York. In February 1947, YIVO received approval from the State Department to remove the YIVO-Vilna and the Strashun Library from the Offenbach Archival Depot and send them to the United States.

While Weinreich and YIVO were successful in their quest for the State Department’s recognition of YIVO-New York’s right to the YIVO-Vilna library, to complete the transfer

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11 Nancy Sinkoff, “From the Archives,” 140.
12 Kuznitz, Making of Modern Jewish Culture, 181-89.
13 George W. Baker to Max Weinreich, July 23, 1945. Box 51, folder 6, Dawidowicz Papers. The focus of this paper is the restitution of the Strashun Library and not the YIVO library from Vilna. See David Fishman, Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture, 139-53 (discussing YIVO’s efforts during the Holocaust to save its library and archives from destruction and the post-World War II restitution of the YIVO Vilna library).
required the War Department’s consent. That would require the approval Capt. Horne, the Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot in 1947, in the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFA&A) division of the War Department, to acquire the extraordinary remnants of the Strashun Library. The State Department solicited Weinreich, to draft the approval letter.\textsuperscript{14} To avoid any last challenge to the restitution of an unrelated library, Weinreich took great care in drafting a letter that simply avoided any explicit mention of the Strashun Library, thus concealing its inclusion altogether in the items sent to YIVO in New York.

Archival records reveal that Weinreich had orchestrated an extraordinary rewriting of historical claims prior to this 1947 letter. In July 1946, Capt. Bencovitz, then Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot, received a letter from Weinreich actually staking a claim of ownership in the Strashun Library.\textsuperscript{15} For reasons unknown, Bencovitz acted upon Weinreich’s petition but without calling attention to this redefinition of the Strashun Library’s primary holders: while the existence of both the YIVO and Strashun materials was first disclosed and recorded separately in the April 1946 Offenbach Archival Depot’s Monthly Report,\textsuperscript{16} after Bencovitz received Weinreich’s letter, the combined items fell under the umbrella term, in the October 1946 Monthly Report, of “YIVO and associated Libraries,” without a detailed inventory of said “associated libraries.”\textsuperscript{17} Thus, the 76,042 items attached to “YIVO and associated libraries” incorporated both YIVO’s and the Strashun Library’s items. Instead of engaging the complexity of ownership and restitution regarding a foreign library, then, Bencovitz had camouflaged—and seemingly compromised—the Strashun Library’s existence through a hasty

\textsuperscript{14} Max Weinreich to Libe Schildkret, February 15, 1947, box 52, folder 1, Dawidowicz Papers.
\textsuperscript{15} Max Weinreich to Isaac Bencowitz, July 9, 1946. NA RG 260, box 259; box 51, folder 9, Dawidowicz Papers.
but creative gambit. When Captain Horne, the new director of Offenbach, arrived in January 1947, he did not specifically inspect the contents of “YIVO and associated libraries” and was unaware it included the Strashun Library.¹⁸

This reference to and rewriting by Weinreich of “associated libraries,” was a solution for Horne but not sufficient for presentation to and approval by the State Department. None of YIVO’s prior communication with the State Department had referenced “associated libraries,” and the term would be unfamiliar and meaningless. To avoid the risk of possible review by the State Department, YIVO’s draft letter used neither “associated libraries” nor explicitly mentioned the Strashun Library in the items approved for shipment to the United States. Instead, in the draft letter, YIVO listed the sum total of all items, an estimated 76,482, without itemizing its constitution (including the Strashun Library). Using the lump sum would both align with the count provided in the Monthly Reports, and not necessitate any mention of the Strashun Library, satisfying Horne and the State Department.¹⁹

Weinreich was not the only actor in redefining and collapsing post-Holocaust Strashun into YIVO. The success of his remote, semantic transfer hinged upon collaboration and coordination with Lucy Dawidowicz, who was closely connected to YIVO and a confidant of Weinreich. Dawidowicz went to Europe as a representative of the Jewish Distribution Committee (JDC). In February 1947, she reached the Offenbach Archival Depot. The stated

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¹⁸ Only in March 1947, did he recognize that the Strashun Library was “simply lumped together in the reports as ‘YIVO and Associated Libraries.”” Horne acknowledged that including the Strashun Library within “associated libraries” “was misleading.” Captain Joseph A. Horne memorandum to Office of Military Government for Germany (US), Economic Division, Restitution Branch, APO 742 to the attention of MFA&A Section. March 1, 1947. National Archives.

¹⁹ Max Weinreich to Lucy Schildkret Feb. 15, 1947, box 52, folder 1, Dawidowicz Papers.
purpose of her mission was to act on behalf of the JDC, and select books and other items from
the Offenbach Archival Depot for a loan program to Displaced Persons in Germany. The
program limited the loan to books that were cataloged as heirless, books for whom the status of
the owner was indeterminate, at the Offenbach Archival Depot. In the process of sifting through
the books, she came upon books from the YIVO and Strashun Library collections. Then, without
Weinreich’s or YIVO’s awareness, she entered into discussions with Horne regarding the
restitution of the books to YIVO in New York.

On February 14, 1947, Dawidowicz first cabled Weinreich with news of her “positive”
discussions with Horne about the holdings of the Strashun Library.\(^{20}\) Dawidowicz had no
knowledge of Weinreich’s private machinations, and so Weinreich was both shocked and
worried that Dawidowicz had revealed to Horne the inclusion of the Strashun Library in the
“associated libraries” moniker.\(^{21}\) In response to the possible compromise of his plan, Weinreich
sent Dawidowicz a long letter in Yiddish, marked “Strictly Confidential,” which detailed all of
his efforts up to that point and expressed his belief that the delicate language in the State
Department’s approval would better serve his purposes. No doubt Weinreich feared that her
revelation would undo that carefully constructed edifice regarding YIVO’s “associated libraries.”

Weinreich was fortunate to find a strong ally in Dawidowicz to continue the historic,
legal, and semantic consolidation of libraries, and by March of 1947, he no longer had to twist
himself into semantic contortions. On March 14, 1947, Davidowicz cabled Weinreich that

\(^{20}\) Cable from Lucy Schildkret to Max Weinreich, February 14, 1947, box 52, folder 4,
Dawidowicz Papers. (“AIRMAIL RUSH COPIES ALL PAPERS RELIBRARY [sic] BETTER
MORE THAN LESS STOP CHANCES FAIRLY GOOD TO GET ALSO STRASHUN WILL
WRITE DETAILS LUCY SCHILDKRET.”).
\(^{21}\) Max Weinreich to Lucy Schildkret, February 15, 1947, box 52, folder 1, Dawidowicz Papers.

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“congratulations do not seem premature,” because the Strashun Library was “assured.” From that point forward, the Strashun Library was specifically inventoried in the Offenbach Archival Depot Monthly Reports. Beyond exploiting Horne’s personal weaknesses, she also admitted that she had relied upon duplicity when she “built up in [Horne’s] mind some real or fictive connections between Strashun and Yivo” to convince Horne of the legitimacy of YIVO’s title to the Strashun Library. With Horne pacified, the final invoice documenting the items for shipment to New York, the YIVO’s and Strashun Library’s items are separately listed under “YIDDISH SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTE - “YIVO” Inc. property. And, on June 18, 1947, the Strashun Library was included in the 420 crates that left the Offenbach Archival Depot, arriving in New York on July 1, 1947, on the S.S. Pioneer Cove.

YIVO’s obfuscation regarding the Strashun Library did not end with its arrival in New York. YIVO remained concerned that any publicity regarding its receipt of the Strashun Library exposed it to a potential challenge to YIVO’s ownership. To mitigate that possibility YIVO continued its project of fabrication and camouflage, persisting in its retention of the Strashun Library even after its arrival in New York.

**YIVO-New York’s Modern Revisions**

As soon as the shipment of 420 crates left Offenbach, Weinreich was engaged in a distinct project of secrecy. On June 17, 1947, Dawidowicz’s last day at Offenbach and the day

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22 Cable from Lucy Schildkret to Max Weinreich, February 14, 1947, box 52, folder 4, Dawidowicz Papers.
23 “Monthly Report,” April 31, 1947 NA RG 260, box 26. Dawidowicz’s friendship with Horne may have also influenced his decision regarding the YIVO materials. Dawidowicz shared with Weinreich that Horne was a “very weak and emotional person” to the degree that she thought “it sort of unfair to capitalize on it.” Lucy Schildkret to Max Weinreich, May 25, 1947, box 55, folder 4, Dawidowicz Papers.
24 Lucy Schildkret to Max Weinreich, February 16, 1947, box 55, folder 3, Dawidowicz Papers.
before the 420 boxes were shipped, Dawidowicz emphasized the need for discretion once the Strashun Library books arrived in New York. She cautioned Weinreich that he should “only have such people that you can trust implicitly to look the stuff over.” Perhaps most insidiously, she suggested back-dating YIVO’s ownership to the Strashun Library books. Bencovitz, when he was the Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot, created a catalog of *ex-libris* stamps to assist in the identification and sorting of books at the Depot. The catalog includes a number of YIVO stamps. Dawidowicz included a copy of YIVO’s *ex-libris* stamps from Bencovitz’s catalog and instructed Weinreich to replicate those and “get a couple of stamps made and start stamping.” Copying the pre-World War II YIVO stamps and applying it to the Strashun Library books gave the books the imprimatur that these books were held in the YIVO library prior to the Nazi’s expropriation and looting of the Strashun Library, a sinister but brilliant revision of the material history of each Strashun book. That same year, Julius Uveeler, the corporate secretary of YIVO, in August 1947, relayed to Seymour Pomrenze that YIVO was still “keeping the

26 The relevant correspondence does not explicitly refer to the Strashun Library, that is the most likely portion of the YIVO shipment that caused the greatest concern. Indeed, YIVO did not hesitate to publicize the return of its library. See, e.g. Seymour Pomrenze [Shalom Pomerantz], “‘Operation Offenbach’: Saving Jewish Cultural Treasures in Germany,” *YIVO Bleter* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1947): 282–85; “YIVO Library is Back at Home,” News of the YIVO, (40) March, 1951. Sinkoff, however, attributes the need for secrecy because of the additional six crates of books that were not from either the YIVO collection or the Strashun Library. Sinkoff, “From the Archives,” 140. But, those books likely only numbered around five-hundred, as compared to the estimated 26,000 Strashun Library books. Five hundred books seems too inconsequential to justify the pleas for secrecy.

matter” of Strashun “secret,” without doubt in collusion with the subtle revision of material titles.

By 1947, then, Strashun books had been stamped by the Strashun and YIVO-Vilna libraries.

Though its history of acquisition was a hidden matter, the Strashun Library was among the treasures in YIVO’s New York library and was critical to YIVO reestablishing itself as a significant force within the American Jewish consciousness as guardian of the memory and history of European Jewry. On the one hand, YIVO was keen to publicize the Strashun Library books; on the other hand, publicity might lead to losing the books entirely and the rewards of ownership. Even the branding by stamps might be questioned by those who might remember how to tell the story otherwise of the Strashun Library.

In order to avoid the troubling history at its very foundation, YIVO deployed a similar subterfuge that it used to conceal the Strashun Library existence within the 420 crates. Rather than term Strashun one of its “associated libraries,” it offers a different umbrella term, the “Vilna Collection,” to include any of the books from the Strashun Library. In so doing, YIVO has

28 Julius Uveeler to Seymour Pomrenze, August 21, 1947, box 55, folder 4, Dawidowicz Papers.
30 The “Vilna collection” did include a small number of books that were not from the Strashun Library. When all crates were prepared for final shipment, the final tally was just 414 boxes, six boxes short of the approved 420. Therefore, at the last minute, Horne authorized the inclusion of another six crates of books that originated in Vilna (and were likely cataloged and selected at the Strashun Library collection point) to complete the shipment. Lucy Schildkret to Max Weinreich, June 17, 1947, box 55, folder 4, Dawidowicz Papers.

The final invoice was prepared before the inclusion of the six boxes, and thus there are no exact numbers regarding these additional books. But, the entire collection of Vilna books were individually counted and cataloged in the Offenbach Archival Depot Monthly Reports and numbered 3,303 total in forty-one crates, an average of 80 books per crate. Accordingly, six crates of those Vilna books only amounted to a little under 500 books, a miniscule number when compared to the estimated 26,000 originating from the Strashun Library, and certainly insufficient to require terminology that entirely erases any memory of Strashun Library books. See June 1947 Monthly Report. Box 52, folder 3, Dawidowicz Papers.
repeatedly and openly discussed and highlighted the Strashun Library’s contents without mentioning (and in drawing attention away from) their source—and even as the Strashun Library provenance was arguably as important as the books within it. By virtue of the uniqueness of the Strashun Library, and that most of the books highlighted in YIVO’s publications were not only part of the historic Strashun Library but also the nucleus of the library, Mattityahu Strashun’s personal collection. Broadcasting its storied history only added to the books’ prestige. Bereft of any independent reason leads to the conclusion that the omission served to deliberate obfuscate and to avoid mentioning the Strashun Library as the source.

In fact, early histories of the YIVO Library celebrated the YIVO-Vilna’s journey and arrival without mention of its Strashun history and contents. In March 1951, YIVO’s newsletter featured a cover article entitled “YIVO LIBRARY IS BACK AT HOME,” which described the history of the establishment of its library, its fate during the Holocaust, and its journey from Vilna to New York. The Strashun Library is not mentioned by name. Instead, YIVO’s request to include the Strashun Library – the only other library that YIVO claimed – is transformed into an appeal by YIVO to the American authorities “to incorporate in [the larger YIVO shipment] the transfer of the Vilna collection from Offenbach to New York.” The makeup of what is coined the Vilna collection remains unexplored. The next issue in June characterized the March article as “a comprehensive account of the return to the YIVO Library of a large part of the former Vilna collection,” sustaining the generalization of the Strashun Library. Similarly, issue

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32 “YIVO Library,” News of the YIVO, (40) March, 1951 (emphasis added). According to the YIVO shipment contained only three-hundred crates and not the true number of four-hundred and twenty.
46, published in 1952, features seventeen books from the “Vilna collection” that evidence some form of historical erasure, even as fourteen of which are easily identifiable as originally from Mattityahu’s library.\(^{34}\) In just a few subsequent years, YIVO gave up referring to the Strashun Library as the “Vilna collection” entirely and just merged it with its own, transforming the Strashun Library into the “Vilna YIVO Library.”\(^{35}\)

In 1963, when YIVO finally acknowledged the distinct existence of the Strashun Library and that it was in New York at YIVO, it still avoided divulging the details as to how the exact legally sufficient methodology that it received Strashun Library.\(^{36}\) This lack of specificity remains in stark contrast to YIVO’s public descriptions of its own transfers and origins.\(^{37}\) Instead, the entire history of the Strashun Library’s trip to New York was reduced to its inclusion in the YIVO shipment from the Offenbach Archival Depot—an inconsequential footnote.

Only one published account exists that provides any details regarding the Strashun Library’s incorporation into the YIVO collection. That account did not appear until the mid-1980s, and needless to say, it does not mention any of fictions that YIVO originally concocted.

\(^{34}\) “Censored Books in the Vilna Collection,” News of the YIVO, (46) 1952. Each of the fourteen appear in the catalog of Mattityahu’s personal library, Likutei Shoshanim, (Berlin: Ittskovski Printing, 1889), “LS”. Bachya’s Commentary on the Bible, (Pesaro, 1514), LS 550; Sefer ha-Terumot, (Venice, 1523), LS n. 1451; Sefer Hassidim, (Bologna, 1538), LS 1804; Mahzor Minhag Roma, (Bologna, 1541), LS 2750; Abudraham, (Constantinople, 1514), LS 1; Pirush Ibn Ezra al ha-Torah, (Constantinople, 1514), LS 3865; Shulhan shel Arba, (Mantua, 1514), LS 5105; Pirush ha-Ketubah, (Constantinople, 1516), LS 3837; Derekh Emunah, (Constantinople, 1522), LS 999; Mesorat ha-Talmud, (Constantinople, 1523), LS 2961; Sefer Ha-Hinukh, (Venice, 1523), LS 1221; She’alot ve-Teshuvot Binyamin Ze’ev, (Venice, 1539), LS 4519; She’alot ve-Teshuvot ha-Rivash, (Constantinople, 1547), LS 4519. The remaining three are early Yiddish imprints, the types of books that the YIVO library specifically collected and are more likely from its library.

The article states that the Vilna collection was comprised of 40,000 volumes.


By that point in time, the myths generated in 1947 would no longer pass muster. In this telling, YIVO agreed to act as shipper of the Strashun Library while the two libraries were still extant in Vilna, in order to export it to safety in America. Now, in this popular re-telling, not only was there no legal merger, but there was not even an informal connection between the YIVO and Strashun libraries. Instead, a non-existent attempted shipment was the vehicle for YIVO’s title. YIVO’s foray into the international shipment business proved especially beneficial, transforming it from postman to owner.\(^{38}\)

A Secret No Longer, the Israeli Relatives Come to America

Over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, YIVO kept up a successful public front of concealing its storied history of acquisition. Initially, however, its enfolding of Strashun was quietly complicated in parallel to its public campaign by the emergence of international heirs’ challenges and subsequent settlements. In the late 1950s, Tzvi Harkavy, a great-nephew of Mattityahu Strashun, an author of numerous books, a Zionist leader, and the director of the Central Rabbinic Library at Hekhel Shlomo, discovered that his ancestor’s Vilna library had miraculously survived the Holocaust and was now housed in New York. In Harkavy’s mind, the Strashun Library’s landlord and ward, a secular Yiddish organization, lacked any obvious connection to the Strashun Library, a diverse home of religious texts. Instead, Harkavy imagined Jerusalem as the Strashun Library’s rightful post-war home at a public library whose collections and patrons better reflected the core purpose of the Strashun Library. Happily, for Harkavy, the library he oversaw was the perfect fit to propound the life-mission of the Strashun Library.

Harkavy claimed that he should be declared heir to Mattityahu Strashun, and the sole arbiter of the location of the Strashun Library. Harkavy’s sued in two forums, the Ministry of Religion, and the Jerusalem Bet Din, for YIVO to disgorge the proceeds of its fraud. Ultimately, all the relevant parties reached a private settlement, in which duplicate rabbinic books were sent

40 Harkavy never provides how and when he learnt of the existence and location of the Strashun Library. The most likely source was Haim Liberman, who began cataloging the Rabbinic portion of the Strashun Library around the time of Harkavy’s revelation. Liberman and Harkavy are known to have corresponded and shared a love of Hebrew bibliography. “Catalog of the Vilna YIVO Library,” News of the YIVO, (54); “The Israeli Central Rabbinic Library, Protocol,” March 1, 1959, Records of Hekhel Shlomo, ISA Chief Rabbinate- - 00050t5, (henceforth “Records HS”), (Harkavy reports that Liberman’s cataloging of the Strashun Library’s rabbinic books began “over three years ago.”).
to Israel’s Central Rabbinic Library, located in Jerusalem’s Hekhel Shlomo neighborhood. For the time being, the public continued—and continues—to remain unaware of the Strashun Library’s unfounded place at YIVO.

The Harkavy episode begins not with Tzvi Harkavy but his wife, Dina. In October 1955, Dina Harkavy, Tzvi’s wife and a Hebrew publisher, travelled from Israel to the United States on a public mission. On that trip, she visited YIVO in New York. There she copied a manuscript commentary on Maimonides authored by Mattityahu’s father, Samuel Strashun. While the record is devoid of any detail as to how she discovered this manuscript – perhaps someone at YIVO wanted to show her something from her ancestor or she somehow already knew this manuscript existed at YIVO – she obtained permission to republish the manuscript and brought back a copy to her husband, Tzvi.

Immediately after her return, an anonymous newspaper article attempted to address the obvious question from her find: “How did the Strashun Library end up in New York?” The article’s answer is that by rights the Strashun Library should never have gone to YIVO in New

41 She was the daughter of Reuven Katz, the Chief Rabbi of Petakh Tikvah. David Tidhar, Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel, (Tel-Aviv:1947) vol. 16, 122-25. For a photograph of her, husband, and son. Id., 122.
42 Harut, October 23, 1955 (announcing her departure); HaMishmar, Oct. 20, 1955. No further details are provided regarding the exact nature of her trip. She is, however, specifically identified as a publisher of Hebrew books, possibly indicating that the trip was somehow connection to the book trade. A.M. Haberman, was in America at the same time as Dina, and he went on behalf of the Association of the Union of the Association of Bibliophiles. Haberman was the one who brought back the tale of the Strashun Library at YIVO, evincing that he too visited YIVO and overlapping with Dina. “How did the Strashun Library end up in New York,” in Harut, November 25, 1955, p. 6. During that same timeframe, a number of librarians and others toured European and American libraries with significant Hebraica holdings during the 1950s and 1960s. Dina’s husband, Tzvi, did just that in 1958. Tzvi Harkavy, “The World’s Largest Judaica Libraries,” Ha-Sefer, 7,8 (1960), 59-62.
43 Tzvi Harkavy states that she specifically went to YIVO at his behest but offers no information how he already knew the manuscript was at YIVO.
York and the only reason that occurred was attributable to a mix-up in book stamps. Only in this case, the stamps negatively impacted the book. According to this article’s historical account, the Strashun Library’s saga began when the Soviets occupied Vilna in the fall of 1946. The Communists approved of YIVO, but not the Strashun Library. Therefore, the Soviets placed the Strashun Library under the authority of YIVO. While under the auspices of YIVO, the Strashun books were incorrectly marked with YIVO’s book stamp. During the Nazi occupation, the Nazi’s looted those libraries and sent books from both to Frankfurt, Germany, for eventual inclusion in the infamous Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage (Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question), under the auspices of Alfred Rosenberg. After the Americans recovered the books, all of the materials marked “YIVO” were sent to New York, including the erroneously marked Strashun Library books. Because of the mistake in markings, the Strashun Library’s books were regarded as YIVO’s, where they continued to reside.

While the article had unknowingly misread the retroactively stamped Strashun books, the anonymous author persisted with the argument that mistaken custodianship was no reason for the Strashun Library to remain in New York any longer. Furthermore, the article reported that the Association of Vilna Jews in Israel, numbering approximately 50,000, had already begun taking steps to retrieve the Strashun Library to Israel. Indeed, they intended to send a “special envoy” to America for that purpose.

In late 1956, Tzvi Harkavy made his viewpoint regarding the Strashun Library’s New York residence abundantly clear in the publication of the Maimonidian YIVO manuscript.

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45 The veracity of this version of events is discussed below.
46 The book was ready for publication earlier that year. Harkavy completed the manuscript on January 24 (11 of Shevat), the same day his son, Judah Leib, underwent his upsherin. The ceremony was performed by the Menachem Mendel Schneerson in Brooklyn. Tzvi Harkavy,
authored by his ancestor Samuel Strashun that his wife, Dina, had retrieved. To this book, Harkavy appended a biography of the Strashun family to the book through which he reinforced his lineage and rights of inheritance of the library.\textsuperscript{47} In his biographical sketch of Mattityahu, Harkavy discusses, among other items, Mattityahu’s book collection and his instructions to donate that library to the Vilna community and build a library. While Harkavy had received the manuscript through the largess of YIVO, he was forceful in his demands for the return of the Strashun Library to Jerusalem. Without sugarcoating his message, he accused YIVO of illegally transferring the Strashun Library to New York. He concluded with a demand that YIVO must disgorge the Strashun Library and repatriate it to Israel.\textsuperscript{48}

\textit{Toldot Rash”sh u-Ketavav, in Mekori Ha-Rambam Le-Rash”sh, ed. Tzvi Harkavy, (Jerusalem: Eretz-Yisrael Press, 1957) [4].} Harkavy’s edition was unfavorably reviewed by Tuvia Preshel. He identified a number of errors and omissions in that edition. Tuvia Preshel, \textit{The Tuvia’s Articles: Indices & Lists}, (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 91-4.}

The date of Tzvi’s arrival in America is unknown. He may have accompanied Dina on her trip to the United States in November 1955, or he went separately sometime after her. Similarly, unknown is whether Dina was still in America in February for the ceremony, the press only noted her departure in November but not her return.

\textsuperscript{47} Even though Harkavy published the book from manuscript, his was not the first edition. Rather, Harkavy’s is the second and is a corrected edition. The first appeared in 1870, two years prior to Samuel’s death. That edition, however, failed to include Samuel’s name on the title page and contained numerous errors. Harkavy rectified both.

Samuel’s name was absent on the title page but not from the book entirely. The publisher’s introduction to the first edition, [Samuel Strashun], \textit{Mekorei ha-Rambam}, (Vilna: Abraham Isaac and his son Shlomo Joseph Dawizivitz, 1870), indicates Samuel’s authorship. \textit{Id.}[2]. While unlikely, there is a possibility that Samuel’s name was left off the title page at his behest. According to some, an author’s name only need to appear in the introduction or elsewhere in the book, and absent on the title page. Yaakov Samuel Speigel, \textit{Amudim be-Toldot ha-Sefer ha-Ivri: Ketivah ve-ha-Atkha}, (Ramat Gan: Bar Illan University Press, 2005).


\textsuperscript{48} Tzvi Harkavy, \textit{Toldot Rash”sh u-Ketavav, in Mekori Ha-Rambam Le-Rash”sh, ed. Harkavy, Jerusalem: 1957, 58 n.19.}
Harkavy put action behind those words. On June 6, 1956, in conjunction with the Association of Vilna Jews in Israel, he filed a formal claim at the Israeli Ministry of Religion challenging YIVO’s ownership of the Strashun Library and demanded that it be sent to the Central Rabbinic Library in Jerusalem.49

Harkavy’s selection of the Ministry of Religion was both pragmatic and aligned with Harkavy’s philosophy of distribution of heirless Jewish books. By 1952, the Ministry of Religion had successfully appealed to the Hebrew University Library’s Otzrot ha-Goleh (The Diaspora Treasures Committee) to share power in the redistribution of over 180,000 displaced religious books among scholarly and religious institutions. The Ministry of Religion, unlike the Diaspora Treasures Committee, was a government agency, and while not a court of law, the Ministry was responsible for distribution decisions regarding those displaced books. Certainly in the first instance, an appeal to the Ministry was prudent, if only because any decision in Harkavy’s favor would have the imprimatur of an independent body.

Harkavy’s litigation strategy was particularly appealing to the Ministry of Religion. In the litigation, Harkavy made explicit his intent that the Central Rabbinic Library would be the ultimate recipient of the Strashun Library books. His rationale for the selection of the Central Rabbinic Library as repository was similar to the Ministry of Religion’s general position that rabbinic books – such as those within the Strashun Library collection – be awarded to rabbinic institutions. Consequently, the Ministry of Religion was both the proper forum and the one that was most sympathetic to Harkavy.

49 “Protocols of the Library Trustees,” June 20, 1956, HS Records. Zerach Warhaftig, the head of the Ministry of Religion, was tasked with writing to YIVO on behalf of Harkavy. Tzvi Harkavy, “Toldot Rash”sh u-Ketavav,” Mekori Ha-Rambam Le-Rash”sh, ed. Harkavy, (Jerusalem: 1957), 58 n.19.
The Ministry of Religion’s powers extended only to the distribution of heirless Jewish cultural items. Harkavy’s claim went beyond the books; he sought an additional declaration from a Jerusalem Court that he be recognized as the legal heir to Mattityahu Strashun. In addition to any financial benefits that he would enjoy as the lawful legatee to Strashun, he would simultaneously clarify further the issue of the dispersal of the Strashun Library and remove the Ministry of Religion from the equation. Only heirless books fell under purview of the Ministry of Religion. With Harkavy as heir, no longer would the Ministry of Religion have any role in deciding the proper location for the Strashun Library.

In fact, YIVO’s original claim to Strashun was premised on the absence of heirs; the recognition of heirs would compromise such a claim. On February 14, 1947, Weinreich wrote to Seymour Pomrenze in Yiddish, justifying YIVO’s title to the Strashun Library because “no living heirs of an independent Strashun Library remain.” Similarly, Lucy Dawidowicz’s appeal to Captain Horne, the Director of the Offenbach Archival Depot, that was concurrent with Weinreich’s, stated that “the remains of the Strashun Library ought to be considered as YIVO property, since Strashun no longer had any owners or heirs” Horne, it seems, was swayed by Weinreich’s argument. In Horne’s memo to the MFA&A headquarters regarding the YIVO materials, he discussed the Strashun Library and YIVO’s claims to the Library. Horne admitted that YIVO’s claims were “not as simple” as YIVO’s other claims. Nonetheless, he favored sending the Strashun Library to YIVO and summarized much of Weinreich’s February 14th letter. Additionally, Horne requested that Dawidowicz translate the February 14th letter, and Horne appended excerpts from that letter in support of his recommendation in the memo,

50 Max Weinreich to Seymour Pomrenze, February 14, 1947.  
51 Dawidowicz, From that Time & Place, 318.
including Weinreich’s assertion, “that there is no legatee surviving for the Strashun Library as an entity.”

In 1958, Harkavy left Israel to visit a number of Diaspora libraries with large rabbinic collections. While his claims remained pending before the Ministry and the Bet Din, he determined that YIVO would be a stop on his itinerary. During his visit, on November 25, 1958, on behalf of the Central Rabbinic Library reached a settlement with YIVO and the parties executed an agreement, signed by Harkavy, in his capacity of the Director of the Central Rabbinic Library, and representatives of YIVO. YIVO did not cede ownership of the Strashun library; instead, pursuant to the terms of the agreement, YIVO would “gift,” to the Central Rabbinic Library, in Jerusalem, any and all duplicates of rabbinic books that bore the stamp of the Strashun Library. Additionally, YIVO pledged one copy of duplicate rabbinic works from the larger YIVO library to the Central Rabbinic Library. The Strashun Library’s rabbinic section’s catalog was in-process and required completion before assessing duplicate copies. The parties estimated the catalog’s completion date at three months hence, with the goal of completion by the end of 1959.

YIVO’s public image and story remained untouched. Notably, following the settlement, YIVO’s newsletters reported Harkavy’s visit and YIVO’s gift but made no mention of the litigation and settlement. In that vein, the gift was claimed to have been sourced from the “Vilna Collection.” The term was used even though the only Vilna specific books agreed upon were the

52 Captain Joseph A. Horne memorandum to Office of Military Government for Germany (US), Economic Division, Restitution Branch, APO 742 to the attention of MFA&A Section. March 1, 1947. National Archives _____.
Strashun Library books. Although the settlement included providing the Central Rabbinic Library with duplicates of non-Strashun library books, those were culled from YIVO’s general collection and not specifically those originating in Vilna. YIVO books from its general collection, other than the YIVO perhaps “Vilna Collection” is justified here, but there is no justification to completely exclude any mention of the most historic and important segment of the gift, the Strashun Library. The initial impetus for the gift was Harkavy’s claim to the Strashun Library and not any other rabbinic books at YIVO. Nevertheless, the Strashun Library, and Harkavy and his uniquely familiar relationship with the Strashun Library was left unacknowledged.

Unfortunately for Harkavy, the settlement between YIVO and the Central Library was comparably limited in scope and did not fully resolve the identity of the Strashun Library’s lawful titleholder. The settlement agreement was executed between the Central Rabbinic Library and YIVO. Harkavy’s role was, as indicated under his signature, “the Director of the Central Torah Library of Israel.” The agreement was regarding the issue of priority for the distribution of heirless Jewish assets. Essentially, the Central Rabbinic Library was recognized as second in line, after YIVO, to receive Strashun Library books. But the agreement did not dispose of Harkavy’s personal claim of heirship.54

Harkavy’s personal claim was eventually resolved, and achieved the same result as the YIVO settlement – the Strashun Library books from YIVO went to the Central Rabbinic Library. The Harkavy decision, however, added to the complexity of the Strashun Library’s post-World War II provenance. Evidence of this convoluted history is told by the final two book

54 Id. n. 81. See also Israel Ta-Shema. “Matzui ve-Ritzui Bibliographia ha-Ivrit,” in Yad le-Koreh, 15(2), 1976,67-82.
stamps contained within the Strashun Library books at the Central Rabbinic Library: a stamp memorializing YIVO’s donation of the book to the Central Rabbinic Library at Hekhel Shlomo, and a stamp memorializing Tzvi Harkavy’s donation of the book to the Central Rabbinic Library at Hekhel Shlomo. With no indication of partnership, the final two stamps conflict regarding the donor. Additionally, only Harkavy’s generosity is recorded without a record of his ownerships or place in custody, further confusing the sequence of events. But much as was uncovered in the opening of this paper regarding the sequence of Strashun and YIVO stamps, when the latter stamps are overlaid with archival information, the book’s full biography is brought to light.

When Harkavy executed the November 1958 settlement as representative of the Central Rabbinic Library, that in no way affected Harkavy’s independent suit for a declaration of rightful inheritance. It was only in February of 1959, after Harkavy returned to Israel, that the Religious Court of Jerusalem concluded that Harkavy was the rightful heir to the Strashun Library. Even so, the books’ fourth stamp was already applied to the Strashun Library books leaving for Israel, a permanent imprint of YIVO’s gift.

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55 I have thus far been unable to locate the exact date that Harkavy received the ruling in his favor. But, the decision must have been rendered after January 19, 1959, when Harkavy returned to Israel, and prior to the end of February 1959, when Harkavy is first reported to exercise his rights as sole heir to Strashun. Harkavy is said to have filed a claim against the German government for a half-million Lira for the loss of the Strashun Library. It is not clear what, if anything, came of this claim. Additionally, the article explains how one can be establish rights as an heir to someone dead for 60+ years. In this instance the court relied upon an expert in Jewish Vilna, Israel Klausner, who wrote a two volume work, Jerusalem of Lita, and the secretary of the Association of Vilna Immigrants. Unfortunately, the evidence presented, in addition to the legal basis for reliance on these experts is not provided. “A Claim of a Half-Million Lira for Compensation for the Destruction of Libraries Destroyed by the Nazis,” Davar, February 26, 1959, p. 3; “The Individual and the Community,” Harut, January 19, 1959, (reporting on Harkavy’s return).
Harkavy was declared sole heir to Mattityahu Strashun in early 1959.\textsuperscript{56} The first shipment of books from YIVO, however, did not arrive in Israel until October of 1960,\textsuperscript{57} over a year and half after Harkavy was recognized as the sole heir to Strashun. But with the declaration of his title, YIVO’s rights to the Strashun Library was extinguished. Irrespective of the book stamp’s peacock YIVO’s gift, Harkavy was the master of the Strashun Library’s destiny. Only he could decide its home.

Harkavy’s confirmation as heir to Strashun coming after the settlement between YIVO and the Central Rabbinic Library, created another kink in the Strashun Library books’ journey. This time, however, a retrospective transfer.

Here, after Harkavy received title to the Strashun Library, he followed through on his commitment and donated his share of the Strashun Library to the Central Rabbinic Library in Jerusalem, leaving unchanged the books’ destination. Irrespective of the destination remaining

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{The News of the YIVO}, July 1960(75). To effectuate the terms of the settlement, YIVO first needed to identify duplicates from its Vilna rabbinic collection. Hayim Liberman had begun work on a catalog of this collection and, at the time of the settlement, was nearly finished. Once complete duplicates would be easily identifiable. Liberman’s task was estimated to last another three months. That estimate was overly optimistic. Some twenty months after the settlement, in July 1960, YIVO reported that the first shipment of nine-hundred and ninety-seven books from the Vilna collection had left port for Hekhal Shlomo in Jerusalem. This was a result of Harkavy’s visit to the YIVO library when Harkavy “was promised a gift of all duplicates of rabbinica in the YIVO Library, particularly of those in the rescued Vilna collection.”


\textsuperscript{57} The second shipment arrived in February 1962. February 8, 1962, \textit{Harut}. 

Dan Rabinowitz
unchanged since November 1958, in 1960, a new agreement was required, with the actual owner, Harkavy. Harkavy’s ownership was applied retroactively nullifying the November 1958 settlement. Unbound by the terms of that agreements he negotiated different terms and conditions.

The most significant changes were regarding the Strashun Library books markings at the Central Rabbinic Library. Harkavy insisted that the Strashun Library books continue to maintain their specific material culture – book markings. The Central Library was required to rebind all the Strashun Library books and emboss the cover with the appropriate source, “from the library of R. Mattityahu Strashun Z”l,” or “from the remains of the R. Mattityahu Strashun Library Z”l from Vilna.”

The embossed cover only tells part of the story, the genesis, and an external observer would perceive no change in the path of the Strashun Library, from YIVO in New York to the Central Rabbinic Library in Jerusalem. From November 1958 settlement and the arrival of the Strashun Library books in Israel in October all remained copasetic. Yet, during that timeframe, another notch was added to the Strashun Library’s journey, a retroactive change that completely upended the status quo. The other term that Harkavy added was regarding the book stamp. The stamps inclusion tells nearly the entire post-World War II history of the Strashun Library. The conflict in stamps’ description, as to the source of the donation to the Central Rabbinic Library tells the story of the human conflict from 1947 through the books’ residence in Jerusalem. A new stamp was added to the Strashun Library books’ cover page, Harkavy’s. It read:

58 One was that the Strashun Library books be assigned a special section in the library. Other books received from YIVO were not treated the same. July 31, 1960 draft of Agreement between Harkavy and Central Rabbinic Library. Wehrafig Archive.
59 July 31, 1960 draft of Agreement between Harkavy and Central Rabbinic Library. Wehrafig Archive.
Harkavy was the full legal owner of the Strashun Library, yet before receiving the Strashun Library books from YIVO, Harkavy elected to forego keeping “his” Strashun Library books, donating them instead to the Central Rabbinic Library. Harkavy never independently held the books; instead, they went straight to the Central Library on arrival to Israel. His stamp that was added to the collection, the books’ fifth, reflected the true nature of the book’s place within the Central Rabbinic Library – as a result of a donation by “Tzvi Harkavy, the sole heir to the Strashun Library.”

The book stamps speak of a more contested material history—and one that YIVO, to this day, refuses to acknowledge and tell. The relocation of the Strashun Library across multiple

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60 July 31, 1960 draft of Agreement between Harkavy and Central Rabbinic Library. Warhafig Archive. Harkavy’s donor stamp only appears on the books originating from the Strashun books that were sent to the Central Rabbinic Library. Books from other Vilna libraries, that were also sent by YIVO to the Central Rabbinic Library, only bear the YIVO donation stamp.

61 Harkavy repeatedly made clear that he was under no legal or moral duty to donate the books, neither by virtue of the settlement or by virtue of YIVO’s gift. July 31, 1960 draft of Agreement between Harkavy and Central Rabbinic Library. Wehrafig Archive. In spite of Harkavy’s generous donation to the Central Rabbinic Library, he was not rewarded in kind. He complains that a year-and-a-half after his trip to American where he executed the settlement agreement, he was still waiting on reimbursement. Additionally, he was disappointed with the Central Rabbinic Library’s initial proposal for the Strashun Library. Tzvi Harkavy to the Minister Shapira, 18 Tamuz, [5],620.

continents, over the course of a decade, is not only an effect of the inevitable post-war
displacement and related fallout. The acquisition of the library by YIVO is not only an effect of
post-war heirless-ness. While YIVO ends its story of Strashun with a story of unavoidable
urgency and resigned acquisition, archival records reveal a far more flawed story, one driven by
opportunism, historical revision, and contestation with rightful heirs.\footnote{Unfortunately, the material safety—and history—of the Strashun Library books gifted to the
Central Rabbinic Library does not end here. By 2000, the Central Rabbinic Library was a shell of
its former glory. Both the building and institution had fallen on hard times, misuse, and
disrepair, and a variety of drastic measures were attempted to save the institution, including
selling all the books in its collection, including the Strashun Library books and other collections
from European Jewish communities and libraries. In some instances, these books were gifted to
the Central Library and include “the condition that the book not be sold or traded.” For example,
a number of books came from the Hungarian Rabbi, Emmanuel Loew’s (1854-1944), substantial
library. This contained close to 6,000 items, including many rarities. Shlomo Shunami, worked
for decades to repatriate heirless Hungarian items to Jerusalem, and, in 1957, finally succeeded
in transferring Loew’s library to the JNUL. The JNUL gifted its duplicates from the Loew
collection to the Central Library. Loew’s books too were included in the items sold off by the
Central Library. Approximately 9,000 books from the Vienna community were sent to
Jerusalem, including to the Ministry for Religion and the Betzalel Institute. See Schidorsky,
\textit{Burning Scrolls}, 447; and 266-74 (regarding Shunami’s larger effort to repatriate items from
Austria); Shlomo Shunami, \textit{About Libraries & Librarianship}, (Jerusalem: Ruben Mass, 1969),
61-63. The facts around the sale are murky, according to Shor, much/part of the collection may
have been gifted/lent to a school. In reality, most of the collection was sold to a handful of book
dealers. See Shor, \textit{Likutei Shoshanim}, 205-06.}