

## Voicing Female Experience in Vilne: The Case of Dveira Dines

**Abstract:** This article uses microhistory methods to explore the impact of the changes in the first half of the twentieth century and how they are represented in the egodocuments written by women. The research is based on previously unknown and unpublished autobiographies and diaries of seamstress Dveira Dines. Her egodocuments are considered from four perspectives: what were the challenges of being a woman; what can be learned about childrearing and healthcare; whether women’s egodocuments can be a chronicle of their generation; and what can they tell us about life in Vilne (Vilnius) and its people. The analysis of these documents shows that egodocuments written by women can help significantly expand our knowledge about everyday life and, in this case, can also show the historical events of that period from the perspective of an ordinary citizen or participant rather than an organizer or ideologue.

**Keywords:** gender and Jewish women; Vilnius; interwar period; Jewish egodocuments.

**Słowa kluczowe:** płeć i żydowskie kobiety; Wilno; międzywojnie; żydowskie egodokumenty.

### Introduction

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the Vilnius Jewish community went through political and social changes that altered the life of the community and society at large.\* Women’s role in the family and society

\* The earlier version of this paper was presented at the international conference “History from below: Microhistorical Approaches to the History of East European Jewry,” which took place in Vilnius in July 2022. The comments and questions of other participants

went through a massive transformation as well. From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, woman's life no longer circled solely around the well-known four *k's*: *kinder, kikh, kleyder un kirkh* (children, kitchen, clothes, and church).<sup>1</sup> This article uses microhistory methods to look at the impact of the changes of the first half of the twentieth century in Vilnius through a case study of Jewish woman Dveira Dines.

The Jewish history of Vilnius has been widely researched, but the city's herstory<sup>2</sup> has so far not been written, nor has it received sufficient scholarly attention. The importance and benefits of applying the approach of gender studies to Jewish history have already been discussed and stressed by many scholars.<sup>3</sup> Moshe Rosman stated: "Jewish culture did not consist only of what men did while women helped or observed; rather in Jewish culture there were different sectors and in each of them there were distinct male and female styles."<sup>4</sup> The increasing research focusing on women's experiences has proved that this approach can broaden the general narrative of Jewish history and bring unexpected results.

helped me to improve it. I also thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Studia Judaica* for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> "Undzer oyfgabe," *Di froy* 1 (1925), 1.

<sup>2</sup> The term refers to history considered or presented from a feminist viewpoint or with particular attention to women's experience.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Paula Hyman has researched the process of assimilation from the gender perspective and concluded that this process was completely different in the case of women compared to men; see Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle, 1995). Iris Parush argues that different education and reading habits led women to be the pioneers of modern culture in Jewish society; see Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Hanover, 2004). Recent research by Emma Zohar has shown that, despite the fact that Jewish socialist parties adopted the progressive agenda in regard to gender roles, in reality, the parties remained ambivalent to the question of gender equality, which made women's position different from that of a male party member; see Emma Zohar, "Between Hope and Struggle: The Gender Struggle and the Jewish Socialist Parties in Interwar Poland," *East European Jewish Affairs* 52 (2022), 1:48–66.

In recent years, Jewish gender studies have developed considerably. Many scholars have stressed the importance of research on women's egodocuments. For example, see Rachel Manekin, "The Cracow Bais Yaakov Teachers' Seminary and Sarah Schenirer: A View from a Seminarian's Diary," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 112 (2022), 3:546–588; Daniela Ozarcky Stern, "'What will the next five years bring me?': Shulamit Pilitovski's personal diary, Lithuania–Jerusalem, 1936–1939," *Jewish Culture and History* 24 (2023), 2:140–156; Joanna Lisek, "'To Write? What's This Torture For?' Bronia Baum's Manuscripts as Testimony to the Formation of a Writer, Activist, and Journalist," *Jewish History* 33 (2020), 1–2:61–113.

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Rosman, "The History of Jewish Women in Early Modern Poland: An Assessment," *Polin* 18 (2005), 31.

A range of Jewish women's autobiographies and diaries about Vilnius are already known to scholars. This includes the memoir of Lucy S. Dawidowicz (1915–1990),<sup>5</sup> an analysis of an unpublished memoir by Frida Kaplan (1892–1982),<sup>6</sup> and the memoir of Anna Vygodskaya, which, among other places, also describes the time she spent in Vilnius.<sup>7</sup> Another example of a Jewish woman's perspective on Vilnius is an autobiographical essay by Anna Rozental (1872–?).<sup>8</sup> An interesting perspective is provided in the autobiography by twelve-year-old Beba Epstein (1922–2012).<sup>9</sup> This selection of autobiographical texts is critical to broadening the men-oriented history of Vilnius Jewry, but it does not disclose how ordinary Jewish women lived. ChaeRan Freeze and Paula Hyman have stressed that East European Jewish women lived in different cultural, political, and social settings, and categories such as social class, geographical location, or marital status created significant differences in women's experiences.<sup>10</sup> That is why it is imperative to look into the lives of women from different backgrounds. The autobiography and diaries of Dveira Dines provide insight into the life of a woman who was not wealthy enough to get a good education and a strong start in her professional life, nor famous enough to mingle with the city's intellectual elite.

Until recently, egodocuments written by Dveira Dines were unknown to scholars. Part of her manuscripts were mistakenly identified as autobiographical materials sent to the YIVO youth autobiography contest<sup>11</sup> and signed by the pseudonym *Masha lebns hunger* (real name: Masha Goldberg). However, during the research, it was established that the biography was not written for the autobiography contest. Furthermore,

<sup>5</sup> Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From that Place and Time: A Memoir, 1938–1947* (New Brunswick, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Zoya Kopelman, "Frida Kaplan on Vilna and Herself: The Changing Image of the City in Frida Kaplan's Memoir 'The Generation of the Desert'," *Pinkas* 1 (2006), 143–167.

<sup>7</sup> Anna Pavlovna Vygodskaja, *The Story of a Life: Memoirs of a Young Jewish Woman in the Russian Empire*, eds. and trans. Eugene M. Avrutin, Robert H. Greene (Illinois, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Anna Rozental, "Bletlekh fun a lebns-geshikhte," *Historishe Shriftn* 3 (1939), 416–437.

<sup>9</sup> Beba Epstein, *Autobiography*, ed. Lara Lempertienė (Vilnius, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> ChaeRan Freeze, Paula E. Hyman, "Introduction: A Historical Survey," *Polin* 18 (2005), 5.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the YIVO autobiography contest, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Marcus Moseley, Michael Stanislawski, "Introduction," in Jeffrey Shandler (ed.), *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust* (New Haven, 2002). These autobiographies became a source for valuable research into the generation of Jewish youth in Poland and beyond, e.g., Kamil Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu. Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* (Kraków–Budażeszt–Syrakuzy, 2020).

the author's age, in fact, places her in the same generation as that of the parents of the contestants. This collection consisted of five diary notebooks<sup>12</sup> from the YIVO collection,<sup>13</sup> two notebooks of the autobiography, and two diary notebooks from the Judaica Research Center at the Lithuanian National Martynas Mažvydas Library (henceforth: LNMMB).<sup>14</sup> In the course of this research, the real author of these documents was identified and additional documents were added to the collection of her writings: one diary notebook<sup>15</sup> and a fragment of a text<sup>16</sup> in the Lithuanian Central State Archives (henceforth: LCVA), one diary notebook in YIVO,<sup>17</sup> one notebook of the autobiography,<sup>18</sup> one diary notebook,<sup>19</sup> and fragments of text in LNMMB. These texts were written from the years 1921 to 1939. It is unclear how many diary and autobiography notebooks are still missing to complete this collection. These available documents constitute around 640 pages of manuscripts in Yiddish and are a rich source of biographical and historical information.

At the moment, the collection of Dveira Dines's egodocuments consists of ten diary notebooks written from the end of 1920 or the beginning of 1921 to the summer of 1938. It is evident that part of the diaries is missing. The frequency of diary entries changes throughout the years. In the earliest remaining diaries written in 1921–1922 and 1926–1929, Dveira Dines writes very rarely; months pass from one entry to another and the entries during this time are quite long. In 1936–1938, she wrote much more often, sometimes even more than once a day. Another noticeable change

<sup>12</sup> The description of the document at the YIVO archives suggests four notebooks. However, in the digitalized document, there are five notebooks.

<sup>13</sup> *Diaries* (Masha lebnshunger), 1936–1938, in YIVO Institute for Jewish Research [henceforth: YIVO], collection: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland (RG 4) [henceforth: RG 4], call no. Yugfor #546.

<sup>14</sup> *Autobiography and Diaries of Masha Goldberg* (pseudonym: *Masha lebnshunger*), 1932–1939, in Lithuanian National Martynas Mažvydas Library [henceforth: LNMMB], collection: Judaica collection [henceforth: JC], call no. F. 228/ b. 799. The cover of one part of the autobiography is marked with the year 1939; another one is marked with the year 1933. It is not entirely clear if the author reused an old notebook or if these were two separate attempts to write an autobiography. This collection also has diaries written in 1932 and 1937.

<sup>15</sup> *Diary*, 1938, in Lithuanian Central State Archives [henceforth: LCVA], collection: Žydų mokslo institutas (JIVO) Vilniuje [henceforth: JIVO], call no. ap. 21/ b. 6, pp. 1–48.

<sup>16</sup> *Unidentified fragments of Yiddish manuscripts*, undated, LCVA, JIVO, call no. ap. 32/ b. 2, pp. 43–44.

<sup>17</sup> *Togbukh fun a Vilner meydl*, 1921–1922, YIVO, RG 4, call no. B29/ F3900.

<sup>18</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

is the spelling she uses. In the earliest diaries, she used original Hebrew spelling for the words of Hebrew origin, but in the 1930s, she tended to use phonetical spelling. Another important characteristic to note is that Dines's diary is sometimes of an autobiographical nature and describes earlier memories of the author's life, taking her back to the early childhood years. However, she also writes about herself in real time: she describes her relationships with people and events at work and shares her thoughts and reflections on political and cultural events.

Three autobiographical notebooks have been identified. One is dated 1933, while the other two were seemingly written in 1939. Furthermore, the earliest autobiographical notebook also has a different narrative structure and it is possible that it was a separate attempt to write her life story. It is clear that Dveira Dines consulted her diaries when writing her autobiography, as many of the early childhood memories described in the diaries she wrote in her youth later appear in the autobiography. It is important to note that the autobiographical narratives in the diary and the autobiography often lack the immediacy of a traditional diary recording events and emotions in real time. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that the description of childhood and youth memories is influenced by later life experiences.

Despite the challenges that an autobiographical source creates for the researcher, it gives a voice to marginalized groups.<sup>20</sup> In the case of this research, it is the perspective of an ordinary, working-class middle-aged woman. Dveira Dines seems to live in her past—in diaries, she constantly remembers her youth and writes mostly about her past life. Dines is an observant and intelligent person who contemplates a variety of topics, from relationships between people to politics. She is also driven by a desire to ensure that her life is not wasted and to leave behind a part of her story. She seeks to give meaning to her life by writing a chronicle of her generation through her autobiography.

### **Who was Dveira Dines, and why did she write?**

The details in the autobiography and diaries, as well as additional archival documents, led to the identification of the actual author as Dveira Dines.

<sup>20</sup> Zuzanna Kołodziejska-Smagala, "Reflection on the Female Body in Polish-Jewish Ego-Documents of the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries – Challenges and Opportunities," *Jewish Culture and History* 24 (2023), 2:164.

Born in 1893<sup>21</sup> in Vilnius, she was the oldest child of Leah and Raphael Israel Dines. Her exact date of birth remains unknown as her father, although “enlightened and freethinker,” acted like the older generation and thought that girls did not need to be registered.<sup>22</sup> And indeed, there is no mention either of her sister Nadia, born around 1904, in the registry of births. It was only possible to trace the date of birth through the date of her death.<sup>23</sup> Israel and Leah Dines also had three sons: Moyshe, born in 1896,<sup>24</sup> Shimel, born in 1899,<sup>25</sup> and Chaim, born in 1904.<sup>26</sup>

The Dines family owned a sewing workshop that operated from the family home. Dveira Dines also became a seamstress. She explains that her contact with the female workers had an impact on her worldview. When she was around ten years old, Dines lost faith in God. This was partly due to the Darwinist ideas introduced to her by the girls in the sewing workshop. She writes that neither the religious nor the heretical narrative could answer her question of how the world was created. She was upset that she had lost faith in God and had not quickly acquired the knowledge about the world.<sup>27</sup> This story is an example of how Dines writes about her youth from the time perspective, as a member of the workers’ movement and later of the Bund. There is a strong possibility that her writing is influenced by her life experiences. As Zuzanna Kołodziejska-Smagała noted, all autobiographies are introspective and self-reflective and are very affected by the later experiences of the writer. However, she stresses, “The category of truth is, in fact, not really relevant in the research as there is no objective truth, and all egodocuments show clearly that personal experience is dominant in our perception of the past.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, these documents provide a very valuable point of view of a middle-aged, working-class woman.

<sup>21</sup> *Internal Passport Application*, 1928, in LCVA, collection: Wileńskie Starostwo Grodzkie [henceforth: WSG], call no. ap. 16, b. 942, p. 1ap.

<sup>22</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 93.

<sup>23</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546, p. 137056. The date stated in the diary coincides with the official death registry, see *Registry of Deaths*, in Lithuanian State Historical Archives [henceforth: LVIA], collection: Žydų bendruomenės [henceforth: ŽB], call no. ap. 1/ b. 348.

<sup>24</sup> *Registry of Births*, in LVIA, collection: Vilniaus gubernijos žydų bendruomenės [henceforth: VGŽB], call no. ap. 4/ b. 4, p. 222.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, call no. ap. 4/ b. 62, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, call no. ap. 4/ b. 118, p. 198.

<sup>27</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, pp. 7–9.

<sup>28</sup> Kołodziejska-Smagała, *Reflection on the Female Body in Polish-Jewish Ego-Documents*, 164.

Dines received only sporadic education, as her father's priority was to be able to educate his sons and his income was not sufficient to pay for the education of all his children. In her youth, as she was already independent, Dveira Dines compensated for the lack of education by devoting time to informal education: she attended evening school for workers, read a lot of fiction and literature on science, and was a member of the literary-dramatic circle at the Mefitsei Haskalah Society.<sup>29</sup>

In her youth, Dveira Dines was also involved in illegal political activity. She took part in an undisclosed left-wing political movement and supported revolutionary ideas. For a while, she was supportive of the Bund; however, her later diaries suggest that, by the late 1930s, she was disappointed with the party. Between 1936 and 1938, when her last diaries were written, Dines was no longer actively involved in any political movements.

It is most probable that her political activity led to her arrest in 1915. She was imprisoned in Lukiškės prison and also mentioned a prison in Sorokino.<sup>30</sup> It is not entirely clear whether she was transferred there to finish her sentence or whether these were two separate arrests. She was released from prison (seemingly in Sorokino) in July 1916.<sup>31</sup> After that, she spent some time in Russia<sup>32</sup>: Poltava, Nizhny Novgorod, and Kharkiv. She returned to Vilnius in October 1918. Upon her return, she learned that her father and one of her brothers had passed away earlier in 1918. Dines's sister Nadia passed away shortly after from tuberculosis in 1919.<sup>33</sup> Her mother, Leah Dines, passed away in 1936.<sup>34</sup> When the last of the identified diaries was written, Dines had lost most of her family members; only two brothers were still alive.

<sup>29</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546, p. 137096. The Mefitsei Haskalah Society was founded in St. Petersburg in 1863 as a means to modernize Russian Jews and to provide them with secular education. The Vilnius branch of the society was established in 1909 to help organize and provide secular education to Jews in Vilnius and its vicinity.

<sup>30</sup> There are many towns called Sorokino in Belorussia and Russia; it is not clear which one is the one mentioned in the diary. *Ibid.*, p. 137097.

<sup>31</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F 228/ b. 799, p. 207.

<sup>32</sup> In the manuscript, the author uses the Yiddish abbreviation R. F. (*Ratn-farband* or Soviet Union), although it was established after her time there. As the country changed its official name and model of government many times through the period covered in the diary and autobiography, for convenience, it will be referred to as Russia throughout this text.

<sup>33</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546, p. 137056.

<sup>34</sup> This date in Dveira Dines's diary was helpful to the research as it allowed the mother's name to be identified and this in turn led to the attribution of the author of this block of egodocuments. *Ibid.*, p. 136999; date of death of Leah Dines mentioned in the diary coincides with the official death registry: *Registry of Deaths*, LVIA, ŽB, call no. ap. 1, b. 429.

When she was writing her last remaining diaries in 1936–1938, Dveira Dines was a single woman; her former marital status remains a mystery. Preserved writings of Dines suggest that she was never married. In the diary written in 1937, Dines addresses someone as “my little child” and “my young boy.”<sup>35</sup> From the narrative, it looks like she is writing to her child, but her other writings do not mention whether she had given birth. At some point around 1937–1938, Dines had a love affair with a married man. In her last diaries, Dines mostly writes about her beloved and is also focused on writing her biography. Her fate during the Holocaust is not clear. Her name is not available on the Vilna Ghetto lists, compiled in May 1942; it is possible that she was killed earlier. As of now, a death certificate that proves she died before the war has not been found.

It is not completely clear why Dveira Dines decided to write her autobiography and why it, along with her diaries, was preserved at YIVO. However, a partial explanation is offered in two letters she wrote to the head of the YIVO Institute, Max Weinreich (1894–1969).<sup>36</sup> It seems that she wrote the first letter after meeting with Weinreich in which they most probably discussed her autobiography. The tone of the letters is rather official, and it seems that the only connection they had was the common goal of Dines writing her autobiography. Both letters mention compensation of 20 złoty. Dines feels torn about whether to take it: on the one hand, she needs to devote time to her writing and feels that the compensation is fair, but, on the other hand, she deliberates that writing this autobiography is her mission to society and taking money for it will be an insult. The second letter focuses more on the writing process; Dines also deliberates that, if she were a rich person or a bourgeois, she would write her personal story, but, as she is poor, the memoir must also reflect her era.<sup>37</sup> These letters suggest that Weinreich was interested in Dines writing her biography, and that might be the reason why it was part of the YIVO collection. However, it is unclear whether there were any plans to publish it or whether it was intended to be included as research material in the archives.

Another question is, what was her motivation for telling her story? One possible motive for writing the autobiography is the wish to leave something

<sup>35</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, pp. 137, 197.

<sup>36</sup> *Incoming correspondence, 1932–1939*, YIVO RG 4, call no. B29/ F 3883, [notebook starting with p. 150877, other pages of the letter are not numbered; p. 150878–150886 and the following not numbered page].

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150883.



after one is gone. She writes: "But what claims the eternity as the written word? . . . Eternal is probably the wish to eternalize oneself."<sup>38</sup> It is clearly important to her to leave a mark of her existence. Another possible motive is that it provided her with an opportunity for self-expression. Dveira Dines obviously had literary aspirations. Although the diary is a personal form of writing, Dveira Dines uses it as writing practice, sometimes rewriting entries several times.<sup>39</sup> She often discusses her writing style and often refers to linguists Zalmen Reizen (1887–1941) and Max Weinreich in connection with her choices of words or language.

### Challenges of being a woman

The nineteenth century brought many changes: increasing secularization, urbanization, and modernization changed the face of traditional Jewish society. The establishment of schools for Jewish girls and special courses of higher education for women allowed young Jewish women in the Russian Empire to pursue secular education, distancing them further from the isolated world of traditional society. Furthermore, emerging Jewish political movements provided women with new roles as political activists. These changes altered women's position in society and family life and, in turn, women were a force in bringing change to the community at large. The analysis of egodocuments written by women provides insights into the everyday life of Jewish women in the twentieth century. It helps to assess the extent to which the changes of the previous century altered their lives.

One could call Dveira Dines a storyteller who carefully observes her physical environment and the people around her. She often shares stories of other people around her; in most cases, these are other women. The men she writes about more broadly are often her family members or husbands of the women she mentions. Dines writes extensively about her father and brother in her autobiography, and in the diaries written in 1937–1938, she writes about her beloved, although, in this case, she mostly shares her feelings for him and we hardly learn anything about his life.

The narrative is different when Dines writes about women. She tells of her friends, family members, or acquaintances, presenting their lives

<sup>38</sup> LCVA, JIVO, call no. ap. 32/ b. 2, p. 43ap. All quotes from the sources discussed were translated by the author of the article.

<sup>39</sup> The tendency to rewrite entries is especially evident in: *ibid.*, call no. ap. 21/ b. 6, p. 17; YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546 (*Diary (mai 1938)*), pp. [18–20].

and experiences. These stories are a source of valuable information about everyday life and traditions. One example of the information provided is an insight into the matrimonial traditions and practices of that era. In one instance, Dines writes about her mother's relative Helene, who recently got married although, in the writer's words, "was already quite aged, as for the beliefs of those days – an old maid, who could already have little hope to get married."<sup>40</sup> Helene was around 23–24 years old. This fragment suggests that concepts and beliefs of the "proper" social behavior might have differed from life's factual reality. This fragment describes events around 1897–1900 and, according to statistical information, marital age in Vilnius changed significantly during the nineteenth century. In 1837, the average age of marriage was 18 years old for women and 19.8 years old for men. By 1895, the average age had risen: 23.2 years for women and 26.3 for men.<sup>41</sup> Statistical information shows that, contrary to Dines's beliefs, Helene married at the average marital age for marriage.

Stories about other women also disclose changing matrimonial practices of the era. Helene's sister Gutke was an intelligent girl and was not looking for fulfilment in life through marriage. She wished to be independent and became a midwife. In Dines's words, at that time, midwifery was like an epidemic for those who wanted to become independent by acquiring an "intelligent" profession. There were even seamstresses who sought education and became midwives.<sup>42</sup> Medical education was indeed popular among Jewish women in the Russian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. For example, in 1879, Jewish girls constituted 33% of all women medical course students.<sup>43</sup> Young women also frequently saw examples of women's dependence on a man. The story of Dveira's mother, Leah Dines, illustrates how sacrificing independence for marriage could put a woman in a precarious and unstable situation. After her father's death, her mother confided in Dines that she had worried about her father's poor health not only because she cared about him but also because of her own fate if she became a widow with young children. Leah Dines felt that she had not established herself in life and was dependent on her husband. Dveira Dines notes that her father had despotic tendencies and did not

<sup>40</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 53.

<sup>41</sup> ChaeRan Y. Freeze, *Jewish Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia* (Hanover, 2002), 53.

<sup>42</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 73.

<sup>43</sup> Eliyana R. Adler, *In Her Hands: The Education of Jewish Girls in Tsarist Russia* (Detroit, 2011), 112.

want his wife to work, which, of course, increased her dependency on him, as she had no income. Besides being controlling, Dines remembers domestic abuse in the household, as her father used to beat his wife.<sup>44</sup>

Another critical challenge for women at the beginning of the twentieth century, reflected in Dveira Dines's texts, is the difficulties women faced in receiving an education. She describes that her education was sporadic—she attended the progymnasium for six weeks; apart from that, she used to learn for approximately six months and then she would not receive any sort of education for a year. As an adult, she put much effort into self-education. She would work for 9–10 hours per day and would then attend evening classes and learn Russian with Deborah Kupershteyn.<sup>45</sup> In one of her diaries, Dines writes that, in 1909–1910, she came to the evening school. This was a place that felt like home. There, she received the education in Yiddish that she had long dreamed of. She praised the rich materials provided to the students, which went beyond books. Students saw experiments in the natural sciences and were taught political geography and Jewish history; there were lectures about Yiddish literature—everything that was needed for the independently developing worker.<sup>46</sup>

The sporadic nature of her education was even more frustrating for Dines when she compared it to that of her brothers: her father continually paid tuition fees for the rabbi and the teacher who prepared her brother for primary school. Sarcastically she concludes, “for a boy they must. Even if one is not overly talented: two years in one class but still hopeless—a young man must [the parents] be able to [educate] even by force.” Dines understood that her father's income was not enough to ensure systematic education for all his children. She felt like a victim of circumstances, losing the opportunity of an education for the benefit of the male children of the family.<sup>47</sup> Most of the time, her parents would find her a teacher to teach her without any tuition fees. One pleasant exception was when Dines was being prepared for the first class of the progymnasium and her parents had hired a female teacher. This was an expensive (although

<sup>44</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 229.

<sup>45</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546, p. 137095. Deborah Kupershteyn (1854–1939) was a famous pedagogue and educator. She worked in various towns across the Russian Empire. In 1912, she opened a school for Jewish girls in Vilnius, which later became part of the *Tsentraller bildungs komitet* (TsBK), the Central Education Committee. The school continued to carry the name of its founder even after Deborah Kupershteyn was no longer working there.

<sup>46</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. B29/ F3900, p. [11].

<sup>47</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, pp. 1–2.

short-term) education, as it cost 5 rubles per month. In comparison, her brother's school (it is not detailed whether cheder or secular) cost 10–12 rubles for the whole semester.<sup>48</sup> The importance of receiving at least basic literacy was obviously understood in the family. Dines remembers that, after World War I, all the family members were nagging her sister, who was around 15 years old at that time, for being the only illiterate family member, even though she had been taught for several years. Dines notes that, despite not being able to read or write, her sister learned to speak foreign languages quickly, was fluent in German and Polish, and did so with a good accent. In addition, she also knew how to count by heart.<sup>49</sup>

Although there were more opportunities for Jewish girls from poor or working-class families to receive an education during the second half of the nineteenth century,<sup>50</sup> Nadia Dines was not the only illiterate Jewish girl in interwar Vilnius and the surrounding region. Fourteen-year-old Chana from Kaunas, in her text sent for the YIVO youth autobiography contest, wrote:

I was like a child raised in the wild. The world seemed strange to me. Ordinary objects were foreign to me. I didn't even know the names of many things. When I learned that there were places called schools, where children were taught how to write and had books to read, it made me sad because I had no one to teach me. If I saw someone reading, I was so resentful that I would cry.<sup>51</sup>

For others who, unlike Chana, received a basic education and literacy, continuing their studies was still a challenge. In another autobiography written for the YIVO contest, a girl from the nearby shtetl of Pabradė remembers that, after graduating from Tarbut school, she wished to continue her education in Vilnius and become a teacher. Her family resisted the idea because of financial reasons, but they also wanted her to stay at home to help with childrearing and household duties. In addition, her mother wanted her daughter to acquire more practical skills and become a seamstress.<sup>52</sup> These examples show that not only girls born at the end

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>49</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546, p. 137057.

<sup>50</sup> For more on education for Jewish girls, see: Shaul Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis, and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2016). The process and challenges of the establishment of schools for Jewish girls in the Russian Empire is broadly discussed in Adler, *In Her Hands*.

<sup>51</sup> "Khane," in Shandler (ed.), *Awakening Lives*, 42.

<sup>52</sup> *Autobiography* ("On a simn"), 1939, YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #386, pp. 145378–145380.

of the nineteenth century like Dines, but even those born a couple of decades later still faced challenges and often had to fight their families to receive an education, sometimes even a basic one.

Another aspect of womanhood that Dines discusses in her writing is her self-image and sexuality. She writes about her femininity and states that, from around 14 years old, she believed that, as a woman, she would not be interesting or attractive. She even goes further to say that she would not have any sex appeal (the term she uses in the manuscript is *seks-apel*). Dveira Dines also shares many reflections on the relationship between man and woman and contemplates sexual relations. It is clear that she is very shy. It is also evident that, although Dines is well-read and most of her knowledge about sexual relations comes from literature, she misuses some terminology. In one of the diary entries, she describes her fear of intimacy with her beloved and asks, “Maybe I am a hermaphrodite or lesbian.”<sup>53</sup> In another diary entry, Dines shares that she did not know enough about relations between a man and a woman. Her parents did not talk about these issues at home. In her youth, she encountered narratives about sex in literature but noted that it would describe a woman being naked without any further information, and she did not know what actually happens between a man and a woman in this situation. She had no idea of how a child was conceived. She assumed that a man and a woman hug each other and the woman gets pregnant.<sup>54</sup> Dines’s writings suggest that women had opportunities to receive at least some information about sexual relationships through literature and it was not a totally taboo topic. However, the information was still limited and it was assumed that it would come through practice after the marriage.

Another very interesting aspect touched upon in Dveira Dines’s ego-documents are the changes brought by ageing. Her mother’s death led Dines to discuss getting older, particularly her changing body. She notes that her face looks different, she needs glasses and has bags under her eyes, and her teeth are in very bad condition, although Dines had a beautiful smile in her youth.<sup>55</sup> In a diary written in 1937, Dines notes that she does not have wrinkles yet, but she has already lost one tooth and now has an artificial one in its place. She confesses that she lost her tooth through negligence—she did not clean the tartar. Somewhat sadly, Dines concludes

<sup>53</sup> LCVA, JIVO, call no. ap. 21/ b. 6, p. 42.

<sup>54</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546, pp. 137141–137143.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137010–137012.

that she is falling apart little by little and adds that she does not know what she wants to do with herself in her remaining years.<sup>56</sup>

The writings of Dveira Dines are an example of how microhistorical research of women's egodocuments can reveal the challenges women faced in marriage, receiving an education, and other spheres of life that are at least partly influenced by surrounding society and its norms. They also provide a rich source of information about personal experiences and emotions related to private life, such as women's self-image, attitudes to their sexuality, and changes in their bodies during the process of puberty and ageing.

### Woman's realm? Childrearing and healthcare

At the beginning of the twentieth century, women of all ethnic groups were responsible for household duties and childrearing. Jewish women were no exception. Daughters were often involved in helping with household duties and the upbringing of younger siblings.<sup>57</sup> Being the oldest daughter, Dveira Dines also had these responsibilities and her texts reveal practices related to children and healthcare. Dines notes that her mother had her share of troubles. But it was not easy for Dines either—she was a daughter who took care of all the problems at home.<sup>58</sup>

Dines's involvement in household duties and childrearing gives the readers a look into the medical practices of her time. As Marek Tuszewicki noted in his research about Jewish folk medicine in Eastern Europe, most people tended to have views on the competence of different kinds of health practitioners. One of the examples is the healing of erysipelas; as the saying goes, "Doctors cannot heal erysipelas" (*a royz kurirn doktoyrim nit*).<sup>59</sup> This statement proves to be true in the case of the Dines family. Dveira Dines's younger brother Chaim had erysipelas and their mother used to send Dveira to an old healer in *Shulhojf*, next to the Great Synagogue. The healer would perform a ritual that involved mumbling something on the packet of white lead Dines brought to her.<sup>60</sup> Her brother Chaim

<sup>56</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, pp. 131–135.

<sup>57</sup> Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis, and Education*, 124.

<sup>58</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 51.

<sup>59</sup> Marek Tuszewicki, *A Frog under the Tongue: Jewish Folk Medicine in Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2021), 57.

<sup>60</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 35.

became sick again that year, this time with throat problems; in this case, a doctor was called. It was discovered that Chaim had a tumour in his throat and it was necessary to operate as soon as possible; otherwise, he could die. Chaim underwent a successful operation in the Jewish hospital.<sup>61</sup>

Her brother's sickness and operation, and the possibility of losing him, brought to light the story that, before he was born, their mother did not want to have another child as "with another child bigger is the poverty." And if not for *royz* (which she chose to believe she had contracted after being frightened by a mouse that had climbed on her at night), the mother would have "taken a bath" and would not have given birth. When she healed herself from *royz*, it was already too late.<sup>62</sup> From the natural and calm tone of the narrative, it seems that "having a bath" was a familiar method of self-induced abortion at the beginning of the twentieth century. This story also raises the question of how much the children were involved in these discussions and when Dines learned about her mother's plan. According to other stories, it looks like the family was a close-knit one and its members were well aware of each other's personal problems. For example, Dines knew that one of her brothers suffered from impotence, which made him feel helpless in the company of girls, though he was a good singer and knew how to play several instruments. Dines also makes fun of his clothes and adds, "One doesn't need impotence not to attract the interest of girls."<sup>63</sup>

Dveira Dines writes about her childhood in a mainly positive tone, although she sometimes criticizes both of her parents for their parenting choices. Unlike her father, her mother was not affectionate. Dines remembers that her father used to come and try to caress her mother, but she would back away embarrassedly. The mother used to argue that she was afraid to kiss. Her fear of intimacy even prevented her from attending the theater, as she was too intimidated to watch "kutseniu-mutseniu"—intimate scenes on the stage. This emotional coldness was also common in her relationship with her children. Dines writes that this was why she was closer to her father as a child.<sup>64</sup> A similar lack of parental affection is also described in the autobiography of Anna Rozental. She remembered that it was only after her father's death that she learned she was his favorite

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 37–41.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>63</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546, p. 137058.

<sup>64</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, pp. 225–227.

child. Rozental writes that, although relationships among family members were friendly and generally good, it was not common to show any affection. Parents would not kiss their children, did not use diminutives in addressing them, and did not show emotions to them.<sup>65</sup> Both women were born at the end of the nineteenth century, when public displays of affection were not welcome, but the demonstration of affection towards the children was acceptable.<sup>66</sup> This kind of coldness might have been influenced by the fact that the mothers of Dines and Rozental had both had either difficult childhoods or faced challenges because of early marriage.

Although Dines writes that she loved her father, she remembers domestic abuse incidents.<sup>67</sup> She also describes one occasion when her mother used physical punishment.<sup>68</sup> Besides the domestic abuse suffered at the hands of her parents, Dines also details cases of abuse by melameds. Once, a melamed hit Dines' brother so hard that his brain became inflamed. She concluded, "And so indeed, in the society of those days[,] that was considered a decent Jew, not some robber in the woods."<sup>69</sup> The cruelty of melameds and physical abuse towards boys has been reported in multiple autobiographies, but such behavior towards girls is encountered rarely. One reason might be that there were fewer memoirs written by women than men. That is the reason that the molestation Dines encountered makes it the most disturbing narrative of the autobiography. When she was six, her parents hired a man, to whom Dines refers as *rebe*, to teach her to read Hebrew. She goes on to describe an incident that happened one time when she was left alone with the *rebe*:

I don't know why, but I was left alone with him. How did the adults allow this to happen? But I know why. A *rebe* – a decent Jew and a child! They were so absurdly reckless and gullible, the adults. Without any common sense! For a little moment, we were left alone. He told me, still sleepy, to read when I felt his fat finger slipping in.<sup>70</sup>

This traumatic case of abuse made Dines feel the weight of her destiny, she felt that other girls would have shouted, and she remained still. She

<sup>65</sup> Rozental, "Bletlekh fun a lebns-geshikhte," 423.

<sup>66</sup> Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis, and Education*, 43.

<sup>67</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 249.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*



was also afraid to tell her mother. Dines sees the idolization of religious authorities as the problem of her generation:

That is why Mark Chagall (so I was told), on his decorations for Sholem Aleichem's work (was it 200,000?), drew a shul as a usual shul, but next to the shul Jews with bowlers and with their pants lowered. . . . Marc Chagall, and we all, and me, forgive my comparison, all children of our times took out into the bright sun the back of their shul. Once in a blue moon the backyard must be aired.<sup>71</sup>

A woman's autobiography can disclose many details about everyday life and practices in the "woman's sphere"—at home, taking care of the household and children, which should not be diminished as less important than, for example, political events. As Paula Hyman noted:

No memoirist is typical of an entire community or social class, but sometimes an unusual individual, though not typical of her generation, can offer an unparalleled glimpse of her own circle and suggest women's consciousness and concerns that transcend her own experience. She can highlight issues that disturbed broad strata within the community and thereby alert us to the distortions that occur when women's experience is ignored. She can also point to phenomena of which there is scant documentary evidence.<sup>72</sup>

As the example of Dveira Dines shows, ignoring women's experiences can lead to overlooking everyday practices and traditions, for example, medical choices of the time period under research.

### Chronicle of the generation

Historian Simon Dubnow prompted pedagogue Anna Vygodskaya to pen her memoir. In the foreword of her book, Dubnow explained that he always thought that the right to record one's reminiscences does not belong solely to writers, politicians, and other public figures. He noted about Vygodskaya's memoir:

In the immediate style of a lively story, without any literary embellishments, the author does not so much illustrate the spiritual life of that generation, with all of its ideological struggles, as present a picture of everyday life and all of the minor details to which male memoirists usually pay no heed, but which are so crucial for the history of our material culture and national traditions.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>72</sup> Paula E. Hyman, "Discovering Puah Rakovsky," *Nashim* 7 (2004), 98.

<sup>73</sup> Simon Dubnow, "Foreword," in Vygodskaya, *The Story of a Life*, 3.

Dubnow was very perceptive in encouraging Vygodskaya to write her autobiography. However, it is difficult to agree with his misogynistic reasoning as to why it is important for women to share their stories. In Dubnow's view, "the spiritual life of that generation" clearly belongs to men, excluding the spiritual life of women as secondary and less valuable. The reflections and recollections of Dveira Dines (and, as a matter of fact, of Vygodskaya as well) prove how inaccurate this kind of perception is. A woman's autobiography can be a source of valuable information about everyday life and an essential source for social history, which is no less important than political history or the events of the "public sphere." But it can also be much more than just that. A woman's autobiography or diary, as in the case of Dveira Dines, can provide information on political and cultural events of her lifetime.

Dveira Dines provides insights into events considered historical today from the point of view of one of the members of the worker's movement, in contrast to an active organizer or ideologue.<sup>74</sup> For example, Dines describes what she did and what she saw during the infamous demonstration in Vilnius in 1902. Her account circles around the family home and orders for citizens to stay home, but she also notes, "After that Hirsh Lekert,"<sup>75</sup> seemingly suggesting his punishment by death.<sup>76</sup> The writings of Dveira Dines also allow the reader to see the Russian Revolution of 1917 from the perspective of a supporter of revolutionary ideas. She received the news about the *coup d'état* while she was in Sarkov. She remembers that people started gathering near the university after the news spread.<sup>77</sup> On the eve of the official proclamation, Dines was in Kharkiv. Her friend Gitl came late at night and announced, "Children, there is a revolution

<sup>74</sup> A great example of how the official narrative constructed by ideologues of certain movements and the experience of its members can be radically different is a research into the diaries of Bracha Levin, revealing how the official literature of Agudas Yisrael about the level of education of Bais Yaakov Seminary in Cracow and the student's perception paint a completely different picture; see Manekin, "The Cracow Bais Yaakov Teachers' Seminary and Sarah Schenirer," 546–588.

<sup>75</sup> Hirsh Lekert (1880–1902), a shoemaker and Bund activist. On 18 May 1902, he unsuccessfully tried to assassinate the governor of Vilnius, General Victor von Wahl, who used repressions against workers and was especially harsh with the Jewish workers. After the failed attempt to assassinate the governor, Lekert was sentenced to death. After this incident, Lekert became a national hero and his story inspired theater plays, movies, and literary works.

<sup>76</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/b. 799, pp. 173–177.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

in Peterburg!”<sup>78</sup> The following day, there were workers’ demonstrations, soldiers also took part, and they even had ammunition. Now everything was at the nation’s disposal. Most importantly, Dines describes her feelings about the news: she felt like a weight had fallen off her shoulders. Although she was released from prison in July 1916, she did not feel free then because, before the revolution, Russia itself was a giant prison.<sup>79</sup> Dines also shares her feelings about the beginning of World War I. At that time, the Dines family lived near the train station and she saw the difficult situation of refugees, dead bodies carried to the trains, and men going to war. She writes that, suddenly, the world was full of injured people who looked like living ghosts. She also remembers her mother crying even though her husband was too sick and her sons were too young to be drafted. Dines explains that it happened because of uncertainty: when they read about the Russian war with Japan, the front line was far away, and now it was close enough to bring hunger and all sorts of disasters. She remembers that, at the beginning of World War I, people thought they should just go on with their lives and wondered whether it was possible that it would last longer than three months.<sup>80</sup>

Dines’s leanings towards left-wing politics seemingly began to take shape at home during her childhood. She describes her father as a nationalistic Yiddishist (*natsyonalish yidishistish*), who had Zionist spirits, but who, at heart, was a socialist, became a bundist, and eventually even started smoking on the Sabbath.<sup>81</sup> Dines stresses that he did not do it for ideological reasons, but rather because of his disappointment in everything and everyone during World War I.<sup>82</sup> Dines notes that, in her youth, it was common for people to be pessimistic; she knew many people who were sceptical and struggled with suicidal thoughts.<sup>83</sup> She even shares that her father considered taking his own life because of financial hardships. As the new thought-provoking research by Kenneth Moss has shown, during the interwar period, the feeling of disappointment and hopelessness was common to Jews in Poland across the political spectrum, to people of

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>80</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546, pp. 137126–137130.

<sup>81</sup> The prohibition against work on the Sabbath also includes the lighting of fire; therefore, religious Jews do not smoke on the Sabbath.

<sup>82</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 237.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

different ages and of different social statuses.<sup>84</sup> Given that Dines was born in the last decade of the nineteenth century, there is a possibility that the sense of disappointment began to show some time before the interwar period.

Dines's autobiography provides an extended description of her family's sewing workshop. This description is an interesting source for understanding the situation of workers at the beginning of the twentieth century. This family business created tensions between Dines's parents, as the father wanted to be a friend to the workers and the mother was left to manage the workshop. She also provided an interesting sceptical point of view towards the workers' movement by those familiar with their hardships. Dveira's mother, Leah Dines, thought girls joined it only to find a husband. She herself wanted to join one of the illegal workers' circles in her youth but, for some reason, was not accepted. Dines describes the times when workers began to demand better working conditions. This was also the case at their family's workshop; some workers had conflicts with her mother because of that. Some workers attended evening schools, which most likely impacted their worldviews. This environment, in turn, influenced Dines. Later in life, she supported the left-wing political movements fighting for workers' rights. In her family's sewing workshop, she heard the worker's songs for the first time; they also prompted her to question religion by introducing her to Darwinist ideas.<sup>85</sup>

Dines interestingly touches upon the question of political choices and considers what attracted her to a particular political ideology: was it the movement itself or the people in it? She concludes that she would like to state that it was the movement, but a person usually thinks of themselves in one way when in reality, they might be someone else.<sup>86</sup> A similar sentiment can be found in other autobiographies, where people joined political movements not because of the ideology itself. In an autobiography written for the YIVO youth autobiography contest and signed by the pseudonym *On a simn*, a girl born in 1920 in a small shtetl close to Vilnius writes about her experience joining the Zionist youth movement "Hashomer Hatzair": "Every small shtetl had an organization which the youth joined not because of their political sentiments and definitely not

<sup>84</sup> Kenneth B. Moss, *Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland* (Cambridge, 2021), 13–14.

<sup>85</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, pp. 99–135.

<sup>86</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546 (*Diary (mai 1938)*), p. [22].

because of the ideas but rather because there was nothing else to do.”<sup>87</sup> These examples raise questions about the importance of political ideology to Jewish youth. They can also demonstrate the scale of influence youth organizations had on political choices.

Despite raising ideological questions, it is clear that Dines was very passionate about the movement’s agenda. In one instance, she writes about a late-night political meeting that took place around 1912. She remembers that she participated in discussions and saw tired faces around her. One girl, Malke K., fell asleep on the ground in the backyard. At that moment, Dines thought that only the weak could fall asleep during the debates. But looking back, she adds that it was a wrong assumption. These people worked all day, came to the meeting afterwards, and had not slept all night.<sup>88</sup> Dines also shares an interesting detail: people would come to these meetings dressed as holidaymakers, as this area was full of summer houses, to avoid suspicion.<sup>89</sup> These stories give an insight into illegal political activities from the point of view of a member, in contrast to memoirs of the ideologues and leaders of the parties, disclosing their passionate involvement, doubts, and ideological questions that arose in the process.

The diaries of Dveira Dines also offer a look into the cultural life in the city. She remembers the first sound movie shown in Vilnius.<sup>90</sup> She writes about going to the theater in 1938 to see Zygmunt Turkow (1896–1970) on tour.<sup>91</sup> One of the most amusing narratives of Dines’ writings is the story of Isaac Leib Peretz’s visit to Vilnius in 1913 and her unexpected meeting with the great writer.<sup>92</sup> Besides attending cultural events, Dines was an avid reader. She quotes or mentions a variety of authors: Stefan Żeromski, Guy de Maupassant, theater critic and essayist Alfred Kerr, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Fyodor Dostoevsky, August Babel, Ilya Ehrenburg, and many others. Such a wide range of interests allowed her to become acquainted with different cultures and religions and that knowledge is evident in her writings. In one instance, she notes, “From time to time inside me fights pagan joy of life and Christian melancholy.”<sup>93</sup> This

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, call no. Yugfor #386, p. 145375.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, call no. Yugfor #546, p. 137121.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137123.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137039.

<sup>91</sup> LCVA, JIVO, call no. ap. 21/ b. 6, p. 24.

<sup>92</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546, pp. 137048–137053.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137134.

quote illustrates that she was familiar with the philosophies of different religions on more than a superficial level.

In one of her diaries, Dveira Dines records her memories of the changing role of Yiddish in the Jewish community. She shares that, at the beginning for her, as for all the others, Yiddish was just a vernacular, but she used to be happy with its success. She used to especially enjoy it when the intelligentsia spoke Yiddish. Dines noted that, in her childhood, the most prominent intellectuals for her were pharmacists. She remembers how overjoyed she was when she visited a pharmacy and heard two pharmacists talking in Yiddish among themselves.<sup>94</sup> There are accounts of Jewish intellectuals understanding and deliberating that they needed to start using Yiddish to connect to the community and spread their message. But Dines's accounts provide insight into how ordinary people actually felt about the changes in the status of their native tongue.

It is evident that Dines closely follows various discussions on culture and the work of cultural institutions. In one of the diary notebooks, there is a note: "Gathering the materials at YIVO on 17 July 1938."<sup>95</sup> It shows that Dines is interested in the work of YIVO and, during her free time, even uses its materials for an undisclosed purpose, most likely for her autobiography. She also mentions that she dreams of being accepted to the aspirantur programme at the YIVO Institute.<sup>96</sup> A few years prior to the visit to YIVO mentioned above, she had a different opinion about the Institute. In the diary, there is the draft of a letter to a linguist, one of the heads of YIVO, Zalmen Reisen, written on 25 February 1933. This letter seems to be a very passionate response to a lecture or speech given by Reisen or an article written by him addressing the crisis of the Yiddish book<sup>97</sup> market. Dines argues that the crisis in the Yiddish book market comes from financial struggle and that people simply cannot afford cultural expenses. She states that she can afford neither books nor theater and asks whether maybe her situation is worse because she is a woman, but promptly answers that she knows men in the same situation. She claims that "the person has to have something to buy with, and if his pocket is empty, one loses the honor to be called [a member of] the people of the

<sup>94</sup> YIVO, RG 4, call no. B29/ F3900, pp. [6–7].

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., call. no. Yugfor #546 (*Diary (mai 1938)*), p. [16].

<sup>96</sup> LCVA, JIVO, call no. ap. 21/ b. 6, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> In the manuscript Dines writes about *yidisher bikher*, the assumption that she writes about the Yiddish and not the Jewish book market is made based on the context of the letter.

book.”<sup>98</sup> Dines goes further and asks Reizen for whom the famous YIVO was intended. She criticizes the fact that the YIVO library is primarily focused on serving students, leaving workers without opportunities to read and learn. Dines praises Reizen for his input into Yiddish culture but notes that he knows nothing about those who suffer a forced cultureless life. She also remarks that youth need literature that reflects their times.<sup>99</sup>

This letter shows Dines’s familiarity with cultural life, as she reads the cultural press, follows public discussions on various topics, and knows about the work of cultural institutions. She also describes the historical and political events of the era. Such an autobiography can indeed be a chronicle of a generation. However, it is important to remember that this is just one example and not something that all women experienced. Rather, it illustrates that the narrative of women’s egodocuments is not limited to the traditional womanly sphere and can depict the wider cultural, political, and other contexts in which the author lives.

### Vilne and its people

In her autobiography and diary, Dveira Dines gives the reader a tour through the city. She mentions many locations and it is important to note that her routes stretch far beyond the Jewish neighborhoods. Her writings take us to well-known locations of Jewish neighborhoods like the courtyard around the Great Synagogue (*Shulhof*) and Šv. Mikalojaus Street at the heart of the Jewish quarter (known as *Gitke Toybes zavulek*, which, according to Dines, has the best lighting in the city), suburbs of the city like Liepkalnis (*Lipuvke*), and the forests of Antakalnis (*Antokol*), the newly erected monument for Governor General Michail Muravyov, the most essential locations for Christians, such as Aušros vartai (*Ostra Brama*), the Cathedral, and many others. In one instance, she writes about her walk to *Teliatnik* (today, part of Bernardinai Garden). She passed through the Cathedral and, for the first time, looked at the sculptures on the building carefully. The sculpture of Moses particularly impressed her. This walk to the park is written in the manner of a travel guide; Dines gives directions on where to turn and describes what is happening in the park.<sup>100</sup> In some cases, she gives a broader description of her experiences in some places

<sup>98</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 399.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 389–409.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13–15.

in Vilnius. She recalls how her parents would take her for walks in her early childhood. They used to go to Bernardinai Garden, which she calls *Gye* (גײ),<sup>101</sup> where a wind orchestra would play. The family would also go to Zakret forest (today, Vingis Park), where she witnessed the sunset for the first time.<sup>102</sup>

No less important than the surroundings and buildings in the city are the relations of people. Antony Polonsky notes that one of the main problems of post-Holocaust historiography about pre-war life in shtetls, especially in the case of memorial books or *yizkhor bikher*, is the fact that non-Jews are hardly present in it.<sup>103</sup> This seems to be true in the case of other accounts of Jewish Vilnius written by women as well; for example, Lucy Dawidowicz writes, “All year I worked and played almost exclusively in Yiddish, for I was, after all, in the Jerusalem of Lithuania, the capital of Yiddishland.”<sup>104</sup> Dawidowicz mentioned places outside the Jewish neighborhoods, but non-Jewish people and everyday relations between people of different ethnicities are mostly left out of the narrative. Therefore, a glimpse of the non-Jewish population provided to the reader by Dveira Dines is very valuable. These narratives show a distinction between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds in the city. Non-Jews are often described as familiar yet something distant. As Dines deliberates about touching the bare hand of a man and whether this action is possibly *treyf* (not proper), she compares her feelings in this situation to a case when she did not want to allow a *sheygets* (non-Jewish man) to drink from her drinking utensil.<sup>105</sup>

Dines understood and identified that there had been differences among ethnicities since her childhood. She writes that, in her early childhood, her father often took her for a walk. Once, she asked him why everyone in the park was walking with a walking stick, and he did not have one. Her father answered that those people were non-Jewish. Dines pointed out that they were speaking Yiddish, to which her father responded that they were Jewish non-Jews (*zey zaynen yidishe goyim*).<sup>106</sup> She also writes that, in her childhood, contacts with non-Jews were limited to her buying cottage cheese fritters in the German neighborhood every Sabbath and

<sup>101</sup> The pronunciation and transcription form used in this article is based on the form used in: Leizer Ran, *Jerusalem of Lithuania* (New York, 1974), 55.

<sup>102</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 235.

<sup>103</sup> Antony Polonsky, “Introduction. The Shtetl: Myth and Reality,” *Polin* 17 (2004), 5.

<sup>104</sup> Dawidowicz, *From that Place and Time*, 102.

<sup>105</sup> LCVA, JIVO, call no. ap. 21/ b. 6, p. 43.

<sup>106</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 235.



occasionally a lemon in a Christian shop. Dines describes that it was warm in non-Jewish shops during the winter and she could warm her feet and notes that the Jewish shops familiar to her were cold and small, unlike non-Jewish ones.<sup>107</sup> These accounts stress the point Dawidowicz is making—it was possible to live with minimal contact with non-Jewish people and, although they met each other daily, there was a level of distinction between these two worlds.

The autobiography and diaries also provide stories of the antisemitism Dines encountered. She remembers that the first time she heard an anti-semitic insult was in *Teliatnik*. A Polish boy around her age shouted at her: “Jewish bastard!” (*zhid parkh!*) He said something that to her sounded like, “Jews are bastards, and we are the fine people” (*zhides zaynen parkhes un mir zaynen fayne layt*). After this incident, Dines remembers feeling grief, being lost, and the bitter question—why? She was also surprised that this was a child from a well-to-do family and it seemed shocking that an “intelligent child” and not someone from a poor family would say such a thing.<sup>108</sup> Antisemitic incidents she encountered later in life are described in a much calmer tone, seemingly suggesting that she was used to this kind of behavior.

Attitudes towards the non-Jewish population and relationships among different ethnic groups can also be seen in Dines’s diary entries after her mother’s death. Apart from the grief caused by the loss, Dines feels very guilty that her mother died in the city’s hospital, although Leah Dines always wished to die at home among Jews. Due to the challenging financial situation, Dveira Dines was unable to maintain the proper conditions for a cancer patient at home and was forced to take her mother to the hospital. For some reason, she could not be taken to the Jewish hospital.<sup>109</sup> Dines writes that other women in the ward were bad neighbors: “the closest to mother was a *vile goye* (let my intolerance be forgiven).”<sup>110</sup> One of the patients, Sore, had difficulties with hearing and visitors had to speak very loudly. The non-Jewish women would jump from their beds because of the shouting. “And we, the Jews? We had the unpleasant feeling of shame

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

<sup>109</sup> Most probably, Leah Dines’ case was too complicated and the Jewish hospital did not treat conditions as difficult as hers. Dveira Dines mentions that another patient was brought from the Jewish hospital, which seems to support the hypothesis; see: YIVO, RG 4, call no. Yugfor #546, p. 137004.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137000.

for our own.”<sup>111</sup> Leah Dines noted that they were not ashamed of others but of the behavior of their own people. When describing this situation, Dveira Dines raises a question: maybe they were ashamed of the lack of culture (*kultur*)? This story might suggest that the Jewish women, at least in this case, seemingly saw non-Jewish patients as superior and felt the need to show or prove that they were equals.

Not every contact with non-Jews was cold and distant; Dines also had positive experiences. Shimele, one of her brothers, had a non-Jewish friend Vladek. Shimele, in Dveira Dines’ words, had “a genuine Aryan head.”<sup>112</sup> Both Shimele and Vladek had blond hair and it was difficult to tell which one of them was Jewish; the only way to answer this question was by their Yiddish. Shimele never learned “goyish,” which in this case meant Belorussian, but Vladek knew Yiddish.<sup>113</sup>

Dveira Dines’ description of the city is warm and loving. It combines descriptions of relationships among people, both positive and not, and the landmark locations while also sharing the author’s emotional relationship and memories connected with these places. The reader is not only led through the city but also learns what those places mean to Dveira Dines.

## Conclusions

In a recently published text, translator Faith Jones writes, “As a student of Yiddish literature, I was told that women’s memoirs are domestic; men’s are chronicles of their generation.”<sup>114</sup> There is no doubt that such a statement is absolutely false in the case of the autobiography and diaries of Dveira Dines (and, as a matter of fact, in the case of many other memoirs and autobiographies written by Jewish women). The research has shown that her writings are a rich source of information on a variety of topics. These topics range from childrearing to illegal political meetings of revolutionaries, as well as the challenges Jewish girls faced to receive an education. Additionally, her writings discuss the mayhem of World War I, the self-image of a woman, and Yiddish cultural life in Vilnius.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 137006.

<sup>112</sup> LNMMB, JC, call no. F. 228/ b. 799, p. 21.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>114</sup> Faith Jones, “How to Suppress Yiddish Women’s Writing,” *In geveb. A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, <https://ingeveb.org/blog/how-to-suppress-yiddish-womens-writing> [retrieved: 1 June 2022].

The writings of Dveira Dines are critical, as they provide the life story of an ordinary, middle-aged, working-class woman, told in her own words. It is relatively rare to find these kinds of accounts, as, more often, autobiographies and diaries preserved in archives and libraries were written by well-to-do or accomplished and famous people. Egodocuments discussed in this research allow us to view critical historical events in an era of constant political and social change through a participant's perspective rather than the perspective of an ideologue or leader of a particular political party or an important communal figure.

A microhistorical look into the writings of Dveira Dines has shown that, although the situation of women changed in the nineteenth century, allowing them to have an education, choose their own marriage partners, and step outside the realm of marital homes into public life, they still faced challenges during the first half of the twentieth century. Most notably, women still struggled to receive an education. The case of Dveira Dines exemplifies how powerful self-education can be. Even with minimal formal education, her intelligence shines through in her texts. She is familiar with political events and ideologies, Yiddish and world literature, and science. This example demonstrates that valuable information about cultural and political events can be found not only in the accounts of intellectual and political leaders but also in the experiences of everyday people.

The perspective of ordinary people can give insight into the struggles of everyday life. As this research has shown, men could have had good relationships with their children, but they can be absent from narratives related to the day-to-day duties of childrearing and healthcare. This suggests, therefore, that egodocuments of women should be included in historical research to a greater extent, as they could open new perspectives to everyday Jewish history or social history. The example of Dveira Dines also shows that an autobiography or diary of one woman can provide stories of multiple other women and can be a resourceful document in the research of traditions, as it can tell stories of many people and provide numerous experiences.

The narrative of Dines's autobiography and diaries provides insight into relations between Jewish and non-Jewish parts of the Vilnius population—a storyline missing from many autobiographical texts. Her writings reveal the presence of antisemitism and an emotional response to it, as well as a certain distance between these two groups of the city's population. However, it also suggests that there could be a close relationship and the level of knowledge about each other's culture and even language.

Most importantly, the writings of Dveira Dines have proved that women's life focused on much more than the famous four *k*'s: *kinder*, *kikh*, *kleyder un kirkh*. *Kinder* can stand for "children of the revolution"; *kikh* can stand for refugees cooking food near the train station and witnessing historical events; *kleyder* can stand for seamstresses working in workshops and being part of a professional union; and *kirkh* can stand for Christian churches around the city, explored by a curious Jewish woman. A woman's autobiography can, indeed, be a chronicle of her generation.

## Bibliography

### 1. Manuscript sources

Lithuanian Central State Archives

Collection: Wileńskie Starostwo Grodzkie, call no. ap. 16, b. 942.

Collection: Žydų mokslo institutas (JIVO) Vilniuje, call nos. ap. 21/ b. 6; ap. 32/ b. 2.

Lithuanian National Martynas Mažvydas Library

Collection: Judaica collection, call no. F. 228/ b. 799.

Lithuanian State Historical Archives

Collection: Vilniaus gubernijos žydų bendruomenės, call nos. ap. 4/ b. 4; ap. 4/ b. 62; ap. 4/ b. 118.

Collection: Žydų bendruomenės, call nos. ap. 1/ b. 348; ap. 1, b. 429.

YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Collection: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland (RG 4), call nos. Yugfor #546; B29/ F3900; B29/ F 3883; Yugfor #386.

### 2. Printed sources

Dawidowicz, Lucy S., *From that Place and Time: A Memoir, 1938–1947* (New Brunswick, 2008).

Epstein, Beba, *Autobiography*, ed. Lara Lempertienė (Vilnius, 2021).

"Khane," in Jeffrey Shandler (ed.), *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust* (New Haven, 2002).

Rozental, Anna, "Bletlekh fun a lebns-geshikhte," *Historishe Shriftn* 3 (1939).

"Undzer oyfgabe," *Di froy* 1 (1925).

Vygodskaia, Anna Pavlovna, *The Story of a Life: Memoirs of a Young Jewish Woman in the Russian Empire*, eds. and trans. Eugene M. Avrutin, Robert H. Greene (Illinois, 2012).

### 3. Secondary literature

- Adler, Eliyana R., *In Her Hands: The Education of Jewish Girls in Tsarist Russia* (Detroit, 2011).
- Dubnow, Simon, "Foreword," in Anna Pavlovna Vygodskaia, *The Story of a Life: Memoirs of a Young Jewish Woman in the Russian Empire*, eds. and trans. Eugene M. Avrutin, Robert H. Greene (Illinois, 2012).
- Freeze, ChaeRan Y., *Jewish Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia* (Hanover, 2002).
- Freeze, ChaeRan Y.; Hyman, Paula E., "Introduction: A Historical Survey," *Polin* 18 (2005).
- Hyman, Paula E., "Discovering Puhah Rakovsky," *Nashim* 7 (2004).
- Hyman, Paula E., *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle, 1995).
- Jones, Faith, "How to Suppress Yiddish Women's Writing," *In geveb. A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, <https://ingeveb.org/blog/how-to-suppress-yiddish-womens-writing> [retrieved: 1 June 2022].
- Kijek, Kamil, *Dzieci modernizmu. Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* (Kraków–Budapeszt–Syrakuzy, 2020).
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara; Moseley, Marcus; Stanislawski, Michael, "Introduction," in Jeffrey Shandler (ed.), *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust* (New Haven, 2002).
- Kołodziejska-Smagała, Zuzanna, "Reflection on the Female Body in Polish-Jewish Ego-Documents of the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries – Challenges and Opportunities," *Jewish Culture and History* 24 (2023), no. 2.
- Kopelman, Zoya, "Frida Kaplan on Vilna and Herself: The Changing Image of the City in Frida Kaplan's Memoir 'The Generation of the Desert'," *Pinkas* 1 (2006).
- Lisek, Joanna, "'To Write? What's This Torture For?' Bronia Baum's Manuscripts as Testimony to the Formation of a Writer, Activist, and Journalist," *Jewish History* 33 (2020), no. 1–2.
- Manekin, Rachel, "The Cracow Bais Yaakov Teachers' Seminary and Sarah Schenirer: A View from a Seminarian's Diary," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 112 (2022), no. 3.
- Moss, Kenneth B., *Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland* (Cambridge, 2021).
- Ozarcky Stern, Daniela, "'What will the next five years bring me?': Shulamit Pilitovski's Personal Diary, Lithuania–Jerusalem, 1936–1939," *Jewish Culture and History* 24 (2023), no. 2.
- Parush, Iris, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Hanover, 2004).
- Polonsky, Antony, "Introduction. The Shtetl: Myth and Reality," *Polin* 17 (2004).
- Ran, Leizer, *Jerusalem of Lithuania* (New York, 1974).
- Rosman, Moshe, "The History of Jewish Women in Early Modern Poland: An Assessment," *Polin* 18 (2005).

- Stampfer, Shaul, *Families, Rabbis, and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2016).
- Tuszewicki, Marek, *A Frog under the Tongue: Jewish Folk Medicine in Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2021).
- Zohar, Emma, “Between Hope and Struggle: The Gender Struggle and the Jewish Socialist Parties in Interwar Poland,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 52 (2022), no. 1.

*Saulė Valiūnaitė*  
Vilnius University  
saule.valiunaite@gmail.com