



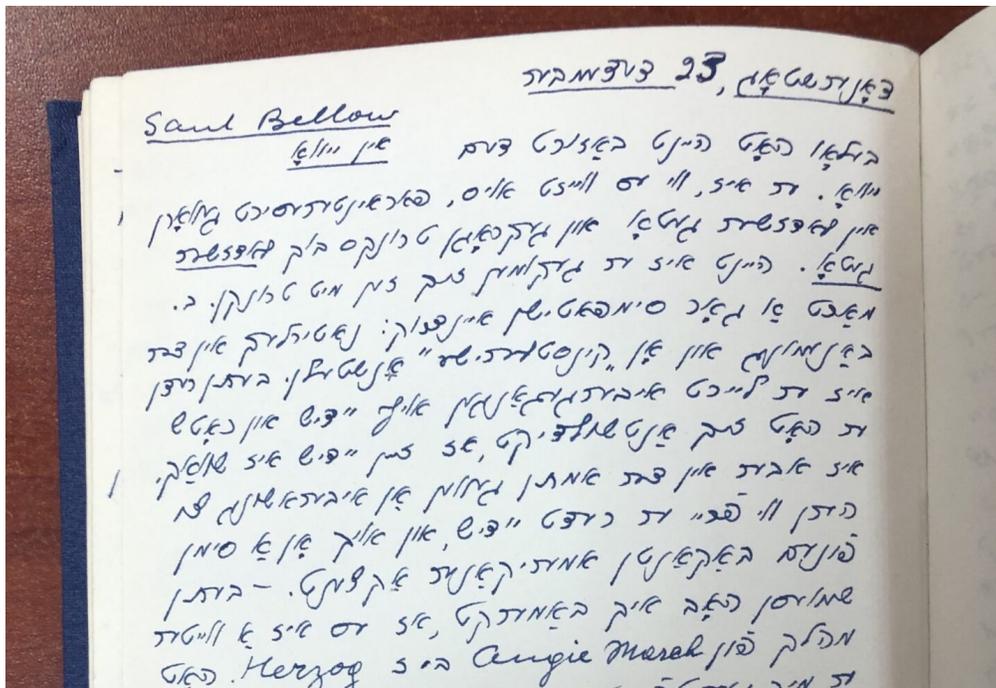
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BLOG

# Three Giants of Modern Jewish Literature at YIVO: Excerpts from the Diary of Ezekiel Lifschutz

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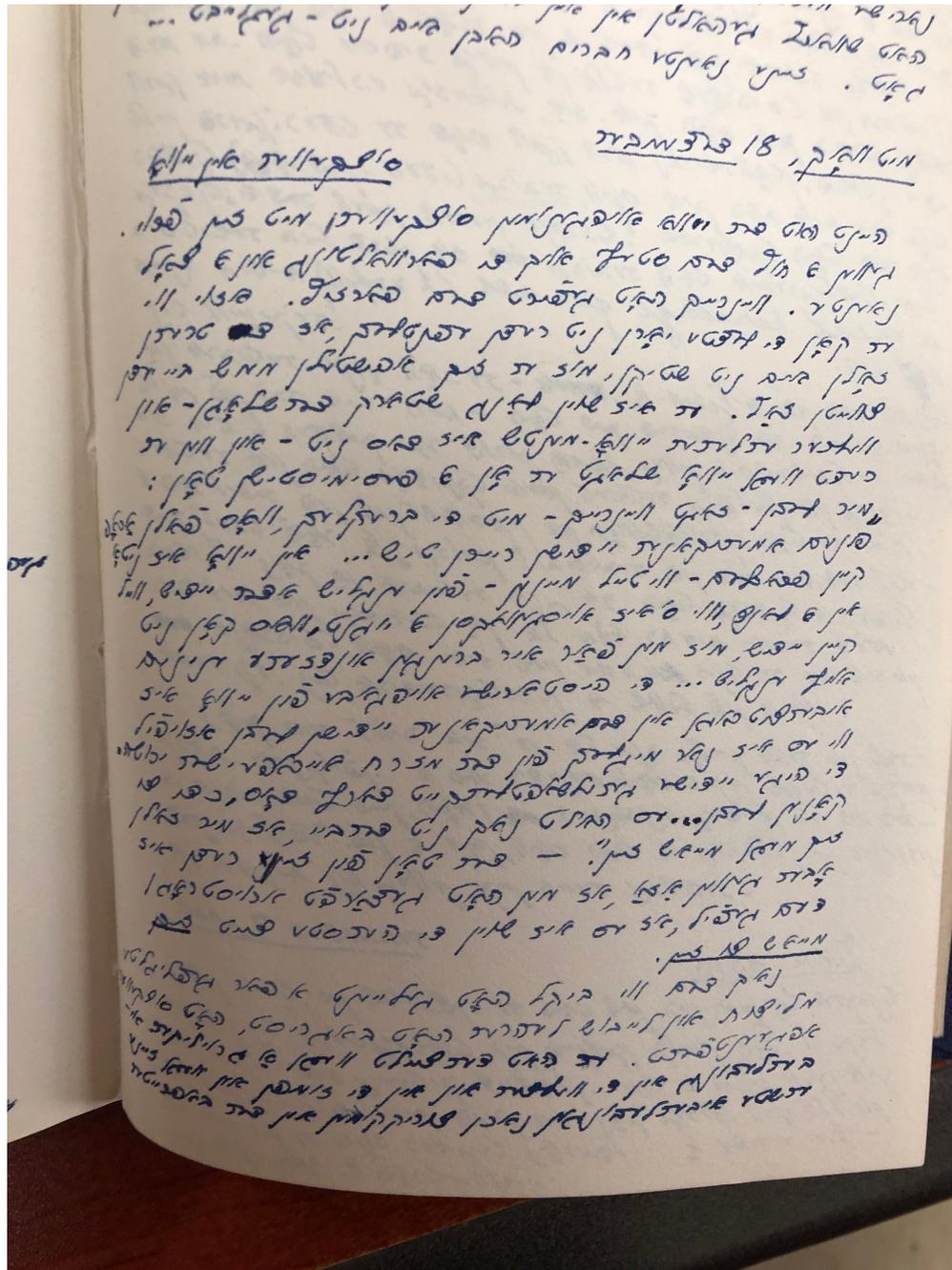
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## INTRODUCTION

Ezekiel Lifschutz was born in 1902 in Radom, Poland, and immigrated to New York in 1923. A student of the historian Jacob Shatzky, the leader of the American branch of YIVO (acronym for *Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut* [Yiddish Scientific Institute]), Lifschutz was affiliated with the center for Yiddish scholarship since its founding in 1925. He taught for many years in Yiddish schools in New York and published several historical works on topics including Jewish migration and aid to pogrom victims, as well as editing several bibliographies and collections of letters. In 1954, Lifschutz joined the YIVO staff and served as chief archivist until his retirement in 1972. From 1962 to 1969, he kept a diary where he recorded his daily interactions at YIVO and in the larger Yiddish world of New York. The excerpts below are taken from the diary, which is now housed at the Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem, and published with the kind permission of his daughter Marcia Lifschutz Weiser.

The diary documents important events at YIVO in the 1960s, including the tragically early death of Uriel Weinreich and the first session of the intensive summer Yiddish program that was later named in his memory. It also provides snapshots of Yiddish cultural life in New York, as Lifschutz listens to talks by Isaac Bashevis Singer and Jacob Glatstein and chronicles his visits to an ailing H. Leivick (and notes that Golda Meir paid a condolence call to Leivick's widow). With the number of Yiddish speakers declining in these years, Lifschutz records both the struggles of YIVO's research director Max Weinreich and his own private doubts about the continued value of their work. Yet his diary also offers striking evidence of the institute's international reputation and importance in the wider Jewish world. Visitors include not only the great Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever but also Saul Bellow and Shai Agnon: future and recent Nobel Prize recipients writing in English and Hebrew respectively. In these brief passages we see something of the personalities of three giants of modern Jewish literature and their relationship to the Yiddish language.



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The first passage recounts a talk in 1963 by the Yiddish poet and partisan Abraham Sutzkever, who organized efforts to save YIVO’s collections and other treasures of Vilna Jewry from the Nazis and Soviets. In his opening remarks, Max Weinreich affirms the relevance of the institute’s work to American Jewish society, as he did repeatedly following its relocation from Vilna to New York in 1940. Yet on this occasion 20 years after the liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto, Weinreich’s subdued mood undermines his ostensibly sanguine message.

Sutzkever recounts a dramatic episode from the Nazi occupation of Vilna. He incorporated the same anecdote, taking place in a cellar rather than an attic, in his poem “Oytoportet [Self-Portait],” dated 1951. In Barbara

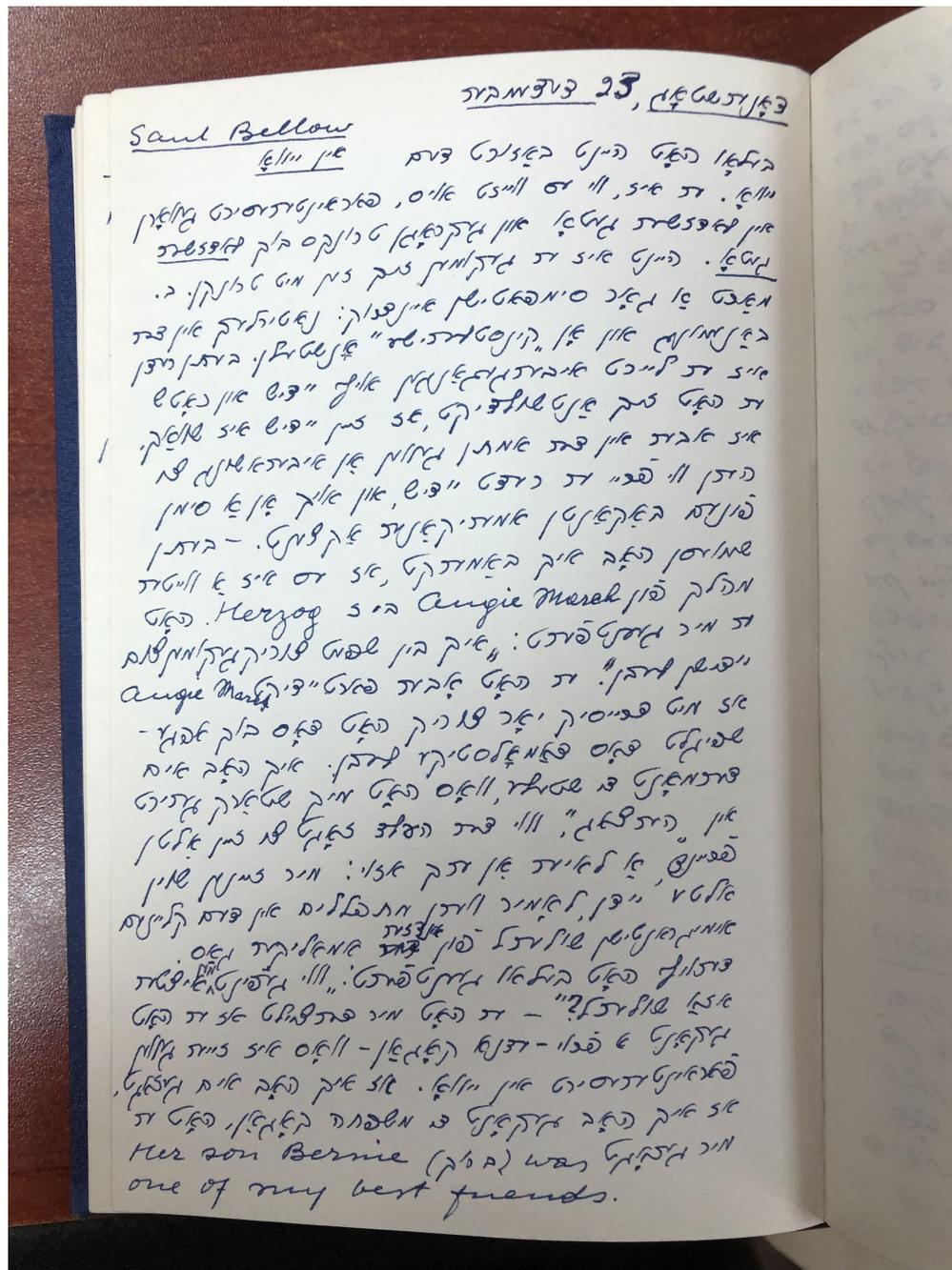
and Benjamin Harshav's translation, it reads in part: "Once, as I lay in a cellar, / With a corpse like a sheet of paper, / Lit from the ceiling by phosphorescent snow — / I wrote with a piece of coal / A poem on the paper corpse of my neighbor. / Now, there is not even a corpse — / Disgraced whiteness / Draped with soot." In these verses, as in Sutzkever's talk, the wartime image of the corpse-turned-canvas is linked to the post-war image of a Vilna without Jews, putting in sharp relief the ethical stakes of using the Holocaust's victims as the basis of art.

Wednesday, 18 December [1963]

Sutzkever at YIVO

Today YIVO welcomed Sutzkever and his wife. Besides the staff, the board members and a few close associates were there. Weinreich chaired. Since in the last few years he cannot speak in public without tearing up he has to pause at every second sentence. For a long time he has been deeply depressed — and what honest person close to YIVO isn't — and when he speaks of YIVO he strikes a pessimistic tone: "We live" — says Weinreich — "with the crumbs that fall from the rich American Jewish table . . . In YIVO there is no question — as some believe — of English versus Yiddish, for in a country where the youth grows up not knowing Yiddish we must acquaint it with our work in English . . . YIVO's historical task is to transplant into American Jewish life as much of the East European heritage as possible. Jewish society here needs this in order to live . . . We have not yet reached the point where we should despair." — The tone of his remarks was such, however, that one had to come away feeling that it was already high time to despair.

After [Shlomo] Bickel read a few flowery phrases and Leibush Lehrer greeted the audience, Sutzkever spoke. He told of a terrifying experience in the woods and swamps and about his first experiences after returning to the liberated and *Judenrein* Vilna. Reality is gruesome enough and he didn't need to add "poetic" embellishments that would slightly cheapen the horrible reality. He and his wife hid from the Nazis and their sniffing dogs in a hole in an attic wall when he was suddenly seized with a desire to write a poem. Through a crack, a spear of light stole into his hiding place and he saw opposite him some white object and on the whiteness he wrote several verses of a poem. When he could move he discovered that he wrote on the shoulder of — a dead Jew . . .



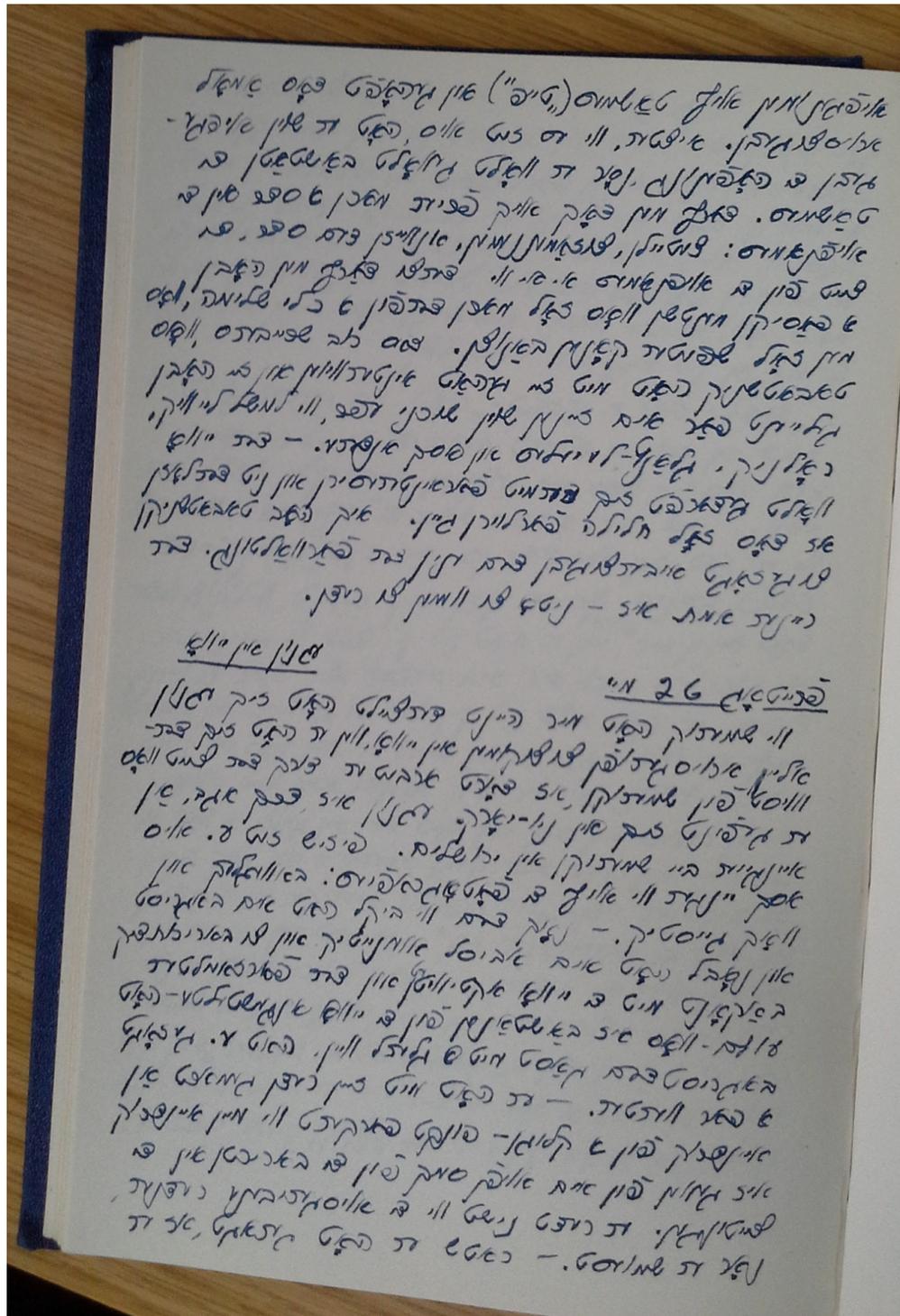
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The second excerpt describes Lifschutz’s encounter with the American Jewish novelist Saul Bellow in 1965, the year Bellow won a National Book Award for *Herzog*. The occasion for Bellow’s visit was to meet the historian Isaiah Trunk, a YIVO staff member. Trunk, a critic of Hannah Arendt’s caustic appraisal of the Nazi-created Jewish councils, published a study of the Łódź Ghetto in 1962. Bellow was presumably gathering material for his next novel, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, which includes lengthy reflections on the Holocaust. Soon after his visit to YIVO, he also traveled to Poland to conduct research on this topic.

The protagonist of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* critiques Arendt's concept of "the banality of evil" and offers his thoughts on Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski, the controversial head of the Jewish council in the Łódź Ghetto. In fact, Sammler is the author of an "article about that crazy character from Lodz – King Rumkowski," whom he describes as "a mad Jewish King presiding over the death of half a million people. . . . Rumkowski, King of rags and shit, Rumkowski, ruler of corpses." However derisive this language, we learn that Bellow was familiar with Trunk's nuanced account of the impossible choices facing the heads of the Jewish councils.

Thursday, 23 December [1965]  
Saul Bellow at YIVO

Bellow visited YIVO today. Apparently he became interested in the Łódź Ghetto and got a copy of Trunk's book *Lodzher geto*. Today he came to see Trunk. B. makes a very agreeable impression: natural in his behavior and without "artificial" pretensions. While speaking he easily switched over to Yiddish and although he apologized for his weak Yiddish, it was in fact a surprise how freely he speaks and without a trace of the well-known American accent. – While talking I remarked that it's a quite a distance from Augie March to Herzog. He replied, "I returned late to Jewish life." However, he defended Augie March, saying that the book reflected life at the time thirty years ago. I reminded him of the scene in Herzog that moved me greatly, where the protagonist says to his friend more or less: We are already old Jews, let's become worshippers in the little immigrant shul on our old block. To that Bellow answered, "Where can you find such a little shul now?" — He told me that he knows a woman — Edna Kogan — who was very interested in YIVO. When I told him that I knew the Kogan family he said to me [in English], "Her son Bernie (Borekh) was one of my best friends." Borekh died about a year ago. — It's typical of his decency that he — the world-famous personality — mentions the simple Jew Borekh as a close friend of his. — As the YIVO building is now being painted I asked him to visit us again when we will show him what we possess. He told me that since he is often in New York he intends to visit us again.



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The final passage records a visit by the Hebrew writer Shmuel Yosef (Shai) Agnon in 1967, the year after he was awarded the Nobel Prize. Agnon came to YIVO in the company of the distinguished scholar of Yiddish literature Chone Shmeruk, winner of the Israel Prize in 1996. Shmeruk's association with the institute began as an 18-year-old in Warsaw, when he contacted YIVO in Vilna about his desire to study Yiddish literature. He was accepted as a student in YIVO's Proaspirantur training program and told to report at the start of school year in September 1939, when the outbreak of war interrupted his plans.

A native of Buczacz, Galicia, Agnon began composing stories and poems as a teenager in Yiddish and Hebrew, but switched exclusively to the latter language after his arrival in Palestine in 1907. In his writings depicting the world of pre-war Galicia, he took on the artistic challenge of depicting a Yiddish-speaking culture in the newly-revived Hebrew tongue. Nevertheless, throughout his life Agnon continued to read and speak Yiddish and demonstrated an interest in Yiddish language and literature. In 1958 he wrote, "I am not very skilled at writing Yiddish now, but I still consider myself a bit of an expert." Agnon's remarks at YIVO testify to his continued engagement with Yiddish as he reflects on the changing role of the language and his relationship to it.

Friday May 26 [1967]

Agnon at YIVO

As [Chone] Shmeruk told me today, Agnon himself proposed coming to YIVO when he learned that Shmeruk was working there during his time in New York. Agnon, by the way, is a close friend of Shmeruk in Jerusalem. Physically A. appears much younger than in photographs: agile and intellectually alert. – After [Shlomo] Bickel greeted him a little and [Shlomo] Noble a little unnecessarily and too solicitously acquainted him with YIVO's activities and the assembled audience – consisting of YIVO staff – greeted the guest with a glass of wine. – A. said a few words. – With his speech he gave the impression of an intelligent man – just the opposite of my impression of him from reports in the press. He doesn't speak like polished speakers, he just converses. – Although he said that he hasn't read any Yiddish for a long time his Yiddish was extremely folksy, precise, and even without the Hebraisms that are widespread in Israeli Yiddish. Shmeruk told me that in fact he [Agnon] does read Yiddish articles that he himself [Shmeruk] passes on to him. He always complains to Shmeruk that he writes Hebrew naturally and in Yiddish he has such odd expressions that are foreign to Agnon and not part of the Yiddish language.

"Once["] – said A. – "people spoke Yiddish well and wrote Hebrew badly" and didn't come to the conclusion, which was an indirect jab at YIVO. It's now difficult for him to read Yiddish. Although, as he expressed it, "You [meaning Yiddish (CEK: in original)] have brilliant writers [but] I can't [read] them, because they use words that are foreign to me[" and he doesn't have time to go searching and checking. It's also difficult for him to read German now. Now he has no time to lose. In Hebrew he just has to take a quick look and he knows what comes next. – Lately he has to devote a lot of time to writing speeches and speaking, and it's entirely a waste of time. – People criticize America and also American Jews a lot. "I like America and American Jews." Chatted and went from one topic to another and after speaking for about fifteen

minutes, when the audience was drawn into the talk, he stopped suddenly with the words: “I can talk this way for hours, it’s a waste of time.” – He promised to come again to quietly view old religious books.

## NOTES

1. A. Sutzkever, *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose*, trans. Barbara and Benjamin Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 199), 232.
2. Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 154 and 191-192.
3. S.J. Agnon, “Funem mekhaber,” in *A poshete mayse*, trans. Eliezer Rubinstein (New York: Der kval, 1958). n.p.

## MLA STYLE

Kuznitz, Cecile E. “Three Giants of Modern Jewish Literature at YIVO: Excerpts from the Diary of Ezekiel Lifschutz.” *In geveb*, March 2022: <https://ingeveb.org/blog/three-giants-at-yivo>.

## CHICAGO STYLE

Kuznitz, Cecile E. “Three Giants of Modern Jewish Literature at YIVO: Excerpts from the Diary of Ezekiel Lifschutz.” *In geveb* (March 2022): Accessed Mar 14, 2022.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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