Ayn Kemach, Ain Torah : Yeshiva Finance in Eastern Europe up to 1939.

## A New Institution ; From Nursery of an Elite Trained in Tradition to a Specialized Institution for Religious Functionaries.

In the nineteenth century a new form of Jewish higher educational institution emerged in Eastern Europe, the Lithuanian type yeshiva. Though Jewish higher educational institutions had existed throughout history these Eastern European yeshivas were unprecedented both in institutional form and orientation. Previously every significant Eastern European town and city had a yeshiva in which those who wished to continue their studies could come and study, books were available and teachers gave classes; some of the students would be supported by the community, through accommodation and meals or even regular stipends. The old type of yeshiva was typically headed by the city’s rabbi whose prestige was underlined by the number of students from outside who came to study. City rabbinical contracts sometimes included the specific number of outside students who would be supported by the local community as an incentive for the rabbi to accept appointment in that city. The old style yeshivas declined in the eighteenth century. But local bais midrashim, informal buildings for study, existed almost everywhere.[[1]](#footnote-2)

The new type of yeshivas starting with Volozhin (1806), Mir (1814-21) and Telz (1875) were usually located in small towns, the students received stipends from and their finances ran through their head, « Roshei Yeshiva. » Even when the students ate in local homes they paid for their meals and accomodations. As Stampfer the standad historian of these yeshivas puts it : « Isolation from the community and financial independence were the main characteristics of the new type of Lithuanian yeshiva. »[[2]](#footnote-3) The yeshivas experienced considerable institutional development during the nineteenth century both in the nature of their activities and in the financial arrangements these now required. As the nineteenth century progressed the yeshivas sometimes acquired a formal curriculum, a largely compulsory set of lectures, periodical examinations and sequential classes through which students passed. None of these existed in the early years of these yeshivas. Dormitories and a common Talmud curriculum started very late and tentatively in the late nineteenth century. The apotheosis of both was the foundation of the Yeshiva Hakhmei Lublin by Rabbi Meir Shapiro in 1930.[[3]](#footnote-4)

But more importantly as Stampfer puts it, having starting out as institutions of higher study, by the end of the nineteenth century they were seen as “Fortresses of Torah,” resisting and isolated from the wider culture. It was particularly in this context that the Musar movement launched by Israel Salanter (1809-1883) spread and despite strong resistance began to dominate the yeshiva world. It was in the leading yeshivas of this movement such as Slabodka (founded depending on your definition between 1863 and 1897) and Nowaradok (founded 1896) that this Musar movement got its greatest strength and provoked the strongest resistance among both community leaders and the advocates of the previous style of yeshiva education.[[4]](#footnote-5)

One change was the creation of « Kolels » for full time study by older, frequently married students. In general, the ages of yeshiva students, who had often been in the early teens increased, resulting in the fact that by the time they finished there was often no time to undertake higher secular studies.

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The motivation for the changed form of these yeshiva is complex. One reading is that the location of the first of them by Chaim of Volozhin or Chaim Volozhiner may have reflected his negative experiences as a town rabbi elsewhere and his consequent return to his home town. But in other cases there was a self conscious choice for small towns to escape the rampant modernization in bigger centers. Nonetheless many yeshivas were also located in or near big cities. Ramales yeshiva in Vilna was a prominent local institution. Other yeshivas moved temporarily or permanently to biglarger cities during ordurig and after World War I, because of the advantages in terms of security and sources of support cities they offered. (safety, large Jewish communities, financial support). One couldshould note that the Jewish population and other Jewish leaders like leading Hasidic rabbis were also movingrebbe’s moved from small towns to larger cities during thisover the same period.[[5]](#footnote-6)

As the nineteenth century progressed yeshivas were also opened by many Hasidic dynasties. Many of the innovations the yeshivas introduced were copied from the secular educational institutions, such as gymnazia (secondary schools) and universities with the yeshiva which the yeshivas competed for students. But the larger motivation was clearly the need to stem the challenges of sécularisation and “enlightenment” which were sweeping everything before them. By the end of the nineteenth century the yeshivas were no longer recruiting from the elite of society or providing recruits for it but from society’s margins.[[6]](#footnote-7) Though as Stampfer emphasizes they Since they were no longer institutiosn for the economic elite, theeir students were more concerned with their vocational future. One notes in passing how many of the students and teachers in the early nineteenth century owned large business firms, including Haim Soloveichik according to one source. They were still important institutions : « At the Eve of the First World War, yeshivas were among the most important institutions of East European Jewish society, and the *rashei yeshivah* among its most prominent leaders. »[[7]](#footnote-8) The yeshiva was an obvious replacement for the urban bais hamedrash in training a scholar elite similar to that in Victorian England or Classical China. By the end of the century the yeshiva was more typically defended as training rabbis and religious functionaries. In its early days Volozhin trained not only leading religious scholars but also secular luminaries such as Chaim Nachman Bialik and Micha Berdichevsky, among the founders of modern Hebrew Literature. Some sense of the variety of students and experiences over the last two centuries can be gained by reading the collection of memoirs of ex-yeshiva students published by Immanuel Itkes et. al.[[8]](#footnote-9) But as Stampfer notes that their role had changed. « Whereas Volozhin reflected the values prevailing in Jewish society at that time and prepared its students to enter its elite, by the end of the cenury the yeshivas increasingly aimed to educate their students *away* from the values favoured by the Jewish elite, which was increasingly defined in terms of wealth and integration into non-Jewish society rather than tradtional talmudic scholardship. »[[9]](#footnote-10)

The overall volume of finance needed for the nineteenth century yeshivas was not great by modern standards, since only a small number of students were enrolled. Stampfer explains that the system for support was modeled on that for the « Haluka » (a system of fund collection in Eastern Europe) which supported the « Old Yishuv, » the traditional Jewish pious settlers in Palestine residents mainly in Jerusalem. The financial support mechanism included both local representatives or « Gabbaim » in various big cities, initially primarily in Russia and prominent local rabbis. They also included « Meshulachim, » travelling collectors. These are also sometimes called Sedarim. The travel and living expenses of Meshulachim consumed much of their collections. Some estimates are that about half their collections were required to support these representatives.[[10]](#footnote-11) »

## Volozhin Yeshiva Accounts

The accounts of the Volozhin yeshiva for some years in the 1880s are contained in Table I below indicating both types of donations and heads of expenditure :

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table I Sources of Volozhin Yeshiva Donations by Year |  |  |
| **Column1** | **Column2** | **Column3** | **Column4** | **Column5** |  |  |
| Source | 1883 | 1884 | 1885 | Income of Volozhin Yeshiva |
| England  | 568 | 407 | 538 |  |  |  |
| Germany | 209 | 343 | 534 |  |  |  |
| Russia Meshulachim | 7006 | 10306 | 10960 |  |  |  |
| Russia Gabbaim | Na | 190 | 370 |  |  |  |
| Russia Individual  | Na | 634 | 580 |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Russia Rabbis | 116 | 176 | 775 |  |  |  |
| Siberia | 858 | 1274 | 1359 |  |  |  |
| US | 1786 | 1433 | 1671 |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Table I Expenses of Volozhin Yeshiva by Year |  |  |  |
| Category | 1883 | 1884 | 1885 |  |  |  |
| Student Allowances | 5939 | 7754 | 10769 |  |  |  |
| Student Travel Expenses  | 1501 | 1788 | 1612 |  |  |  |
| Salaries  | 3618 | 3758 | 3914 |  |  |  |
| Emissaries Travel Expenses | 573 | 281 | 373 |  |  |  |
| Care of Sick | Na | 256 | 283 |  |  |  |
| Books | 464 | 406 | 458 |  |  |  |
| Candles  | 348 | 365 | 465 |  |  |  |
| Clothing  | 161 | 117 | 109 |  |  |  |
| Building Repairs  | 324 | 396 | 210 |  |  |  |
| Holidays and Purim | 387 | 408 | 386 |  |  |  |
| Mail | 85 | 107 | 148 |  |  |  |
| Insurance  | 36 | 75 | 35 |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Miscellaneous  | Na | 11 | 136 |  |  |  |
| Deficit | 298 | 1584 | 2545 |  |  |  |
| Source: Hamelitz, as quoted in Stampfer, p. 182, 185. |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| The budget above includes sums paid to the family of the deceased Hayyim Volozhiner as a result of an arbitration about the succession to the management of the yeshiva. |  |  |  |  |  |  |

harassed them overreported the same numbers. Though peripheral concessions on these matters were made, these concessions

The Russian government itself established rabbinical academies which operated for some years and provided and demanded considerable secular studies. These were closed in 1874, possibly because they were thought to be centers of radical thought. However, these seminaries served to a considerable extent as preparatory institutions for secular higher education and were classified as « Uchilische » sub university institutions.

The Czarist government insisted that the official ( « government ») rabbis who recorded births, deaths and marriages in each city, have a then rare high school diploma. But the government rabbis never gained the support of the religious masses, especially when we compare them to the traditionally trained rabbis.

Similarly, for several decades the more traditional rabbis of the Agudas Harabonim in the United States insisted that their members be ordained in Europe, and a number of American students went to the Eastern European yeshivas for training. The Agudah refused to admit the graduates of American institutions like Yeshiva University and the Jewish Theological Seminary, who formed their own rabbinical organizations. All of these organizations continue to exist.

## Number of Students

There were between 200 and 400 students in the Volozhin yeshiva during the 1880s. Some were self financed.

Various figures are given, but even in the interwar period when the yeshivas were somewhat expanded probably less than 5-10,000 students were enrolled. The Klibansky volume cited elsewhere shows less than 5000 in the late 1930s but these are figures from both Poland and Lithuania and are almost certainly undercounts; official figures for Poland in 1934-35 alone showed 30,000 but this almost certainly includes many younger students. Anecdotal accounts report some decline in enrollment in the 1930s as compared to the 1920s because of the Depression, but other factors, such as growing American and German enrollment would have increased enrollment. Many of the students were financed by family and other private funders on an individual basis.[[11]](#footnote-12)

## Sources of Finance

In the earliest period as documented by Stampfer, Volozhin was financed by a large number of relatively small donors but soon the fund demands grew. As shown above, according to the accounts of the Volozhin Yeshiva published in the newspaper **Hamelitz** only 5% of the yeshivas budget came from large donors. Stampfer reports on correspondence with some of the yeshiva’s early donors including Abraham Harkavy, the Head of the Oriental Section in the Imperial Library in Saint Petersburg, a former Volozhin student, who occasionally intervened for the yeshiva with the Imperial bureaucracy.[[12]](#footnote-13)

The wealthyKlibansky estimates that 30-60 percent of Yeshiva budgets were supported by local, hometown donations in the interwar period (1919-1939). The most wealthiest Jews in Russia in Russia, such as the Gunzbergs and Polyakovs gave relatively small amounts to the yeshivas; their major donations went for other causes, especially the secular education of the poor Jewish masses. However, by the 1880s a small number of large donors to the yeshivas emerged. These included the Wissotzky family from Moscow, and two wealthy Germans : the last German Baron Rothschild (Willem Carl von Rothschild, 1828-1901) and Emil or Ovadya Lachmann of Berlin. Though his name appears in the register of the strictly orthodox Adass Israel (austrittsgemeinde, the separate orthodox community), details of his commercial activities are hard to find. The founder of the Wissotzky tea trading firmfirm still active as a family owned firm until today now in Israel (Zeev Kalonymus Wissotzky, 1824-1904) was himself a former student at Volozhin. Lozhin Yeshiva trained not only ultra orthodox leaders, but also religious Zionist and supported other Jewish causes. He had studied privately with Israel Salanter, the founder to the Musar movement. His daughter was a prime funder of the Ponevezh Yeshiva in 1908.[[13]](#footnote-14)ones, and even xecular Zionists like Bialik and Micha Berdischevsky.

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## After World War I

However limited the finances of yeshivas were in the nineteenth century, they were entirely deranged by World War I, the Eastern Front of which was where they were located. Many of the yeshivas had to flee before the rapidly moving armies on that front. After the War the yeshivas were also effected by the elimination of Russian support after the Revolution and the increased poverty in East and Central Europe. These developments effected the volume of local donations and also earnings from the rental property with which some of them had been endowed.

Klibansky pays considerable attention to the financial support for the yeshivas in the Interwar Period. He reiterates that they could no longer rely on Russian donations after the revolution.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Eastern and Central Europe including Germany were devastated by World War I. Only one or two small yeshivas charged tuition, and most provided their students stipends. In this they differed from most other Jewish educational institutions in Eastern Europe. Initially some of the slack was picked up by the United States. This included collections by Meshulachim in the United States. These American meshulachim had existed before the War, but their activities accelerated afterwards. The collections had also to support the meshulachim themselves and were often low yielding. Aaron Kotler of Kletsk later famous as the founder of the Lakewood Yeshiva in the United States, reported that the total annual net American collections in the middle twenties was $220, one month’s food bills for the yeshiva in Kletzk, which he headed. Nonetheless yeshivas frequently established American offices, organized their American alumni, and had their directors make fundraising trips to the United States. Collectively these American fund drives raised tens of thousands of dollars for those yeshivas who were able to mount American fund raising drives. Those who could not or would not often complained about the unfair advantage yeshivas with American outreach had. Other yeshivas published anniversary books to which the wealthy contributed — though Elijahu Wasserman, one of the successful as head of yeshiva in his American tours, objected in principle to these anniversary books on the grounds that there was no precedent for them. Klibansky estimates that 30-60 percent of yeshiva budgets were supported by local, hometown donations in the interwar period (1919-1939).

The funds collected were sufficient to permit some of the yeshivas to construct new buildings. In 1930 Ponevezh, founded in 1908, built one for $8000 donated by a lady from the United States named Pesi or Pesya Miller-Feigen. I have not been able to find more information about her except a possible gravesite in suburban Philadelphia. It is also the case that the 1920s and 1930s saw some acceleration of the construction of yeshiva buildings indicated that some funding was still flowing.

There were also some collective efforts involving funding from the American Joint Distribution Committee and Ezras Torah, initially linked but later parallel, the Keren Hatorah Fund promoted by Agudas Israel, and the Haffkine Foundation founded in 1930 out of the estate of the prominent Russo-French scientist Waldemar Haffkine. But none of these ever provided much funding, and the former two déclined in the 1930s as with all other forms of funding because of the Great Depression. Joint Distribution Committee funding declined from 10 to 4% of yeshiva funding.[[15]](#footnote-16) The attempts to secure government funding were limited and unsuccessful except for a short period in Lithuania. The Haffkine money was also limited and took some time to begin to flow. At no point was it more than10,000 Swiss Francs [roughly $200,000 in 2015 dollars} a year.[[16]](#footnote-17) These collective funds were normally allocated by a committee of leading rabbis, such as Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky of Vilna (1863-1940) and the Chafetz Chaim (Israel Meir Kogan, 1838-1933), joined in Keren Hatorah’s case by a couple of leading Hassidic rabbis.

In his summary, Klibansky emphasizes the changes in the yeshivas which were manifest in the interwar period. They were serving what was now a minority of the Jewish community – orthodox and less interested in secular education. The Bund, the Zionists religious and secular, and assimilation were all now the major forces. Conscious of their besieged status the yeshivas drew in themselves and became stricter in their observance. This was strengthened both by the increasing energy of the Musar movement and its yeshiva opponents lead by those like the Hazon Ish. On the other hand, the yeshivas continued their rapprochement with the Hasidim. In contrast to the earlier periods those who went to the yeshivas generally made a voluntary decision to support these trends.

But the difficult economic situation in general bore down both on the yeshiva students and the institutions themselves. The yeshivas response was a considerable greater centralization, homogenization, and consolidation of the yeshivas that continued to exist. These trends continued in the Postwar yeshivas as we will see in the addendum that follows.

1. Http:www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Yeshiva/The\_Yeshiva\_before\_1800 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Shaul Stampfer, **Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century : Creating a Tradition of Learning.** OUP, 2012, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. David Mandelbaum, **Yeshivas Hakhmei Lublin** (**The Hakhmei Lublin Yeshiva**, Jerusalem, 1994 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Stampfer, pp. 361-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Several moved to Vienna and Warsaw. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Stampfer, p. 367ff;http :www.yivoencyclopedia,org/article.aspx/Yeshiva/The\_Yeshiva\_after\_1800 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Stampfer, p. 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Immanuel Itkes and Shmuel Tikochinski ed., **Yeshivot Lita : Pirchei Zichronot**, Jerusalem : Merkaz Zalman Shazar and Merkaz Dinur, Hebrew University, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Stampfer, p 360ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ben Tzion Klibansky, **The Lithuanian Yeshivas in Europe between the Two World Wars**, PHD Tel Aviv, 2009 citing Aaron Cutler in the 1920s, p. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Klibansky, pp.376-382. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Stampfer, pp. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. “Verzeichniss der Mitglieder der Israelitischen Sybagogen-Gemeinde Adass Jisroel zu Berlin pro 1898 », in Center for Jewish History Library NYC. « Haherut,” 4/1/1911. Announce death of our founder H Lachmann from Berlin, Jerusalem by VAad Moshdos, Petah Tikva. Signed Jonathan ?. Also in “Moriah.” Also in CJH Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Klibansky, pp. 216ff. Ben Tzion Klibansky, **The Lithuanian Yeshivas in Europe between the Two World Wars**, PHD Tel Aviv, 2009 – published as **Ktsur Halamish: Tur Hazahav Shel Yeshivot Halitait bMizrach Evropa**, Jerusalem, Israel: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2014, with English summary in back. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Klibansky, pp. 254ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. According to [www.historicalstatistics.org/currrency converter.html](http://www.historicalstatistics.org/currrency%20converter.html), was equal to about $25,000 in 2015 United States Dollars or $108,000 as the price of gold it would have been able to secure. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)