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Tracing the private archive of Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson

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Tracing the private archive of Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson

Key words: Chabad, Schneerson dynasty, Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson, private archive of Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson, trophy collections

The history of the Second World War is full of stories of cultural treasures being looted, confiscated, and lost — and only in rare cases recovered. These are stories not only of paintings and sculptures, but also of book collections and archives, as was the case of many Jewish collections.

The fate of the Schneerson private archive is not as widely known as that of the Schneerson library, the famous collection torn apart by the Russian revolution in 1917. However, the fate of the archive is another typical World War II-era story of spoils of war seized by Soviet troops in 1940s Europe. Such collections were generally of no use to the Soviet authorities, so they were buried — made virtually inaccessible to the public or to scholars — in state repositories for decades.

History of Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson's private archive through the end of the Second World War

The history of the Schneerson private archive has not yet been thoroughly researched. While the Schneerson book collection has garnered plenty of attention, the archive remained in the shadows, though it contains important information for research on such topics as the development of religious Jewish communities in Soviet times as well as the history of the Sixth Lubavitscher Rebbe himself and the history and organization of Chabad in the period between the two world wars.

The archive grew as Rabbi Schneerson made his long journey from Lubavichi to Rostov (in the 1910s), and to Moscow and Leningrad (1924). He seems to have begun collecting documents in a systematic manner after becoming a Rebbe in 1920, because the part of the archive dating from the 1910s is significantly smaller than that from the 1920s and 1930s. Probably, the wars — the First World War as well as the Civil War in Russia — also played their role in minimalizing the amount of documents preserved from that time. In 1927, after the Soviet government changed his death sentence to deportation from the Soviet Union, Yoseph Yitzhak left the USSR and settled in Riga, Latvia, taking the archive with him. In 1934, he moved to Otwock, Poland and in 1940, he fled Nazi-occupied Poland for the U.S., leaving his archive behind. In Poland, the archive was looted by the Nazis and afterwards seized by Soviet troops.

Private archive vs. collection of manuscripts

The private archive of Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson is not to be confused with the Schneerson collection of manuscripts. This misunderstanding — that the private archive and the manuscript collection are one and the same — arises in several works of research¹. The private

¹ For instance, Michael J. Bazzyler and Seth M. Gerber mention “a collection of handwritten teachings” that does not seem to be a proper description of the Schneerson archive's documents. See Michael J. Bazzyler, Seth M. Gerber, “Chabad v. Russian Federation: A Case Study in the Use of American Courts to Recover Looted Cultural Property”, *International Journal of Cultural Property* 17 (2010): 365.



archive includes mostly official documents as well as the correspondence of the Sixth Lubavitscher Rebbe. It contains some handwritten religious works as well, but probably just drafts: the papers are not bound into books.

The manuscript collection consists of bound handwritten books on religious matters: teachings, sermons and other works written by the Lubavitscher Rebbes and other prominent rabbis. In 1915, when German troops were approaching Lubavichi, several hundred manuscripts together with the library of printed books were sent to safe storage in Moscow, where they were nationalized after the Russian revolution (as were the printed books from the Schneerson library)². They are now preserved in the Russian State Library.

There is another part of the manuscript collection: the manuscripts that Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson and his father, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber Schneerson, took with them when fleeing to Rostov in 1915 as well as the manuscripts that Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak acquired from 1920 to 1927 (for instance, from Samuil Viner together with a huge library of printed books). He managed to take these manuscripts with him when leaving for Riga, Latvia in 1927 and then again, when he moved to Warsaw and Otwock, Poland. While living in Latvia and Poland, he probably enriched his manuscript collection. He managed to take part of it with him when he escaped from Otwock to the U.S. in 1939–1940, as reported by his secretaries³. However, another part of the manuscript collection remained in Poland and after the end of World War II ended up in the library of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw⁴. In 1978, after lengthy negotiations, the manuscripts were restituted to Agudas Chabad Lubavich in New York⁵. The restituted manuscript collection contains only the bound handwritten books⁶, i.e. neither the documents nor correspondence were found there (in contrast with the private archive).

In this article, I will focus only on the private archive of Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson, seized by Soviet troops in Poland and brought to Moscow after the end of World War II.

History of Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson's private archive after the end of the Second World War

Research on the topic has just begun, so there are more questions than answers concerning the fate of the archive during the war. Evidently, the archive was seized by Soviet troops in Poland, probably in Wölfelsdorf (today Polish Wilkanów), Silesia, where many Jewish and Masonic archives seized by the Nazis⁷ were found, then brought to Moscow and placed in the so-called Special Archive that later became the Russian State Military Archive (RSMA). It is quite possible that some of the archive was lost — either under the Nazis or in the postwar period. The Soviet troops did not take much interest in the proper transportation of seized trophy documents, and

² For the history of the Schneerson library see Ekaterina Oleshkevich, “Rediscovering the Schneerson collection: historical aspects and challenges of provenance research”, in: „*Treuhänderische“ Übernahme und Verwahrung – international und interdisziplinär betrachtet. Wien, 2.-4. Mai 2017, Tagungsband*, eds. Olivia Kaiser, Christina Köstner-Pemsel, Markus Stumpf (Vienna: Vienna University Press, 2017). (in press).

³ *Sifriyat Lubavich* [Lubavich library]. Ed. Shalom Duber Levin (New York: Kehot, 1993): 112. [In Hebrew]

⁴ *Ibid*, 112–114, 150.

⁵ *Ibid*, 150–156.

⁶ *Ibid*, 151, 154–155.

⁷ Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, “Beyond Cold War Over a Restitution Claim?”, *Antiquity and Law*. XVIII, Issue 4 (2013): 375.



some parts of the archive were therefore mixed in with other archives — for example, certain documents from the archive were found in the fond of the Military Archive devoted to the Vienna Jewish community and there are probably others in other fonds as well. Apparently, the documents now preserved in fond 706 of the Russian State Military Archive are not the whole archive once collected by Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson. We will probably never know what the entire archive contained: it was a private archive, apparently not kept in a systematic manner, without an inventory or any documentation of its contents (or if there ever was such documentation, either it no longer exists or we are unaware of its existence). Therefore, all that can be done is to identify the documents that once belonged to the Schneerson archive and were then dispersed among the RSMA fonds.

When brought to Moscow, the archive was placed in the Central Special Archive of the USSR. The Special (*Osobiy*) Archive was established in 1946 for the purpose of preserving trophy documents seized in Europe, and its holdings were inaccessible to scholars because they were considered secret military documents. In addition, the Schneerson archive contained only Jewish documents, and almost all documents in any way related to Jewish topics were inaccessible and in many cases not even listed in the catalogues. The private archive of Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson shared the fate of all the trophy collections that were buried in the state repositories and remained “useless.” The Soviet government had no idea what to do with them and no desire to research them. The trophy collections (archives as well as books) seized by Soviet troops were considered more as compensation for losses during World War II⁸ than as documents usable for research. For this reason, the archives were kept without any research concerning them being done. In some cases — for instance, in the case of the Schneerson private archive – the situation for the most part still remains the same today.

Schneerson private archive from the breakup of the Soviet Union until today

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, researchers could gain access to the archive. In 1999, the *Osobiy* archive became part of the Russian State Military Archive. The documents are now available to researchers on standard terms, great progress in comparison with the USSR. Still, however, there are almost no scientific works using documents from the Schneerson archive. Interest in the trophy collections in general was and remains strong, but this interest is mainly in the context of restitution.

In 2005, the Russian State Military Archive published a catalogue of its Jewish holdings in Russian and English, including a description of the Schneerson archive⁹. It became the first officially published “description” of the archive¹⁰ – before that, even Chabad was not sure that the archive was preserved in the Russian State Military Archive¹¹. However, the information in the catalogue

⁸ Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *Reconstructing the Record of Nazi Cultural Plunder. A Survey of the Dispersed Archives of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR)* (Amsterdam: IISH, 2011): 41–42.

⁹ *Jewish Documentary Sources among the Trophy Collections of the Russian State Military Archives. A guide*. Eds. David Fishman, Mark Kupovetsky, Vladimir Kuzelenkov (Moscow: RGGU, ETSA, YVO, RGVA, 2005).

¹⁰ Except for several references to the archive in articles from the early 1990s, for example, George C. Browder, “Captured German and Other Nations’ Documents in the *Osoby* (Special) Archive, Moscow”, *Central European History* Vol. 24, No. 4 (1991): 442.

¹¹ Michael J. Bazylar, Seth M. Gerber, “Chabad v. Russian Federation: A Case Study in the Use of American Courts to Recover Looted Cultural Property”, *International Journal of Cultural Property* 17 (2010): 365.



is mostly general and does not provide any real details about the archive. Still, it was a first step in publicizing information about the archive.

The Schneerson archive was also included in the Chabad lawsuit for the return of the books and documents belonging to the Schneerson family, which has remained unsuccessful.

In 2015, the Russian State Military Archive together with the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow (JMTC) launched a cataloging and digitization project with the goal of making the Schneerson archive available online. It includes the cataloging of all the items preserved in the archive and providing at least a short description for each of them including the language of the document, time and place of creation, its content, special features if there are any etc. At this point, the project is well underway — numerous documents have already been catalogued and some of them have even been scanned, however it is still far from completion due to many legal, technical, and even political problems. When finished, the project will be a great contribution to the research of Chabad history and the history of Hasidism in the early 20th century, providing fascinating and still unknown material.

What can be found in the archive?

For now, the private archive of Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson — or fond number 706 of the Russian State Military Archive — contains 98 files including about 75 hundred folios, and approximately a hundred folios are located in other RSMA fonds (at least the documents of which the RSMA and JMTC staff is aware)¹². The archive spans the period from the early 1890s to the late 1930s (the latest documents are dated 1938). The archive material can be divided into two big groups: documents from the 1890s–1910s and documents from the 1920s–1930s.

1890s–1910s

The history of the Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson archive begins in the late 19th century, when he (or probably his father at that time) started collecting different documents related to him or his family. One of the earliest documents in the archive is a letter addressed to Rabbi Shalom Dov-Ber Schneerson, the Fifth Lubavitscher Rebbe, from 1890. However, the early 20th century, i.e. the period when R. Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson had not yet become the Chabad leader, is quite poorly represented in the archive. The archive includes sermons and letters from this period¹³ as well as bank and insurance documents. The extracts from the registry of birth confirming the date of birth of Y.I. Schneerson's daughters (Sheina, Khana, Chaya-Mushka) are from the same period¹⁴. From the years of the First World War and Civil War, there are medical documents confirming that Y.I. Schneerson was exempt from military service for medical reasons (1916–1920)¹⁵. This material makes up the first part of the archive, and it is quite small.

¹² So, the estimation of the archive's contents made in the article of M. Bazylar and S. Gerber: "a collection of handwritten teachings comprising more than 25,000 pages" should be considered as at least doubly exaggerated, besides the fact that the archive contains not only and even not primarily handwritten teachings as discussed above. See Michael J. Bazylar, Seth M. Gerber, "Chabad v. Russian Federation: A Case Study in the Use of American Courts to Recover Looted Cultural Property", *International Journal of Cultural Property* 17 (2010): 365.

¹³ Op. 1, d. 83 — sermons from 1905, d. 95 — letters from 1908.

¹⁴ Op. 1, d. 1, ll. 24–26, 38, 54ob.

¹⁵ Op. 1, d. 5, ll. 9–12.



1920s–1930s

Most of the archive's documents cover the period of the 1920s and 1930s, providing information about the private history of Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson, his family and his religious activity as well as the history of Chabad.

The intellectual legacy of R. Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson comprises a significant part of the archive. There are sermons and reflections on different topics: the system of Torah teaching in religious Jewish schools¹⁶ (1923), the intentions and purposes of the Hasidic movement¹⁷ (1926), Jewish isolation¹⁸ (1938?), the Haskalah movement¹⁹ (1938?), Jewish emancipation²⁰ (1938?) etc.

A significant portion of the archive is comprised of *letters* — addressed to Y.I. Schneerson or written by him. Among them are letters in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, Latvian, English and German. The letters can be divided into two groups: *private* and *official*. Among the *official* letters, there is correspondence with the representatives of different Jewish communities in the USSR, the U.S., former Palestine, Europe²¹, as well as letters of congratulations on different occasions (for instance, on the wedding of Y.I. Schneerson's daughter²²) or telegrams where Jewish communities wished Y.I. Schneerson a safe journey²³ (1927). There are also letters from and to different Jewish organizations such as the Jewish committee in Berlin²⁴ (1929), “Shomrei Shabbat ve-ha-dat” in Warsaw²⁵ (1929), the American Youth Organization “Tipheret Joseph”²⁶ (1930), the Jewish Transylvanian Congregation in Jerusalem²⁷ (1929), Zairei Agudat Israel²⁸ (1929), Agudas Hasidim Anshei Chabad²⁹ (1931), Pinkhas ba-Kherev³⁰ (1931) etc. Most official letters date from the late 1920s or early 1930s.

Among the *private* correspondence are letters in Yiddish written by Y.I. Schneerson to his wife, Nechama Dina, and his relatives while traveling to Palestine and to the U.S. in 1929–1930, some of them sent while aboard the liner “France” that took him to the U.S. in 1929³¹. Among the private letters are also invitations to the wedding of his daughter, Chaya Mushka, and his future son-in-law and the Seventh Lubavitscher Rebbe Menachem Mendl³² (1929) as well as letters of good wishes on Chanuka and other Jewish holidays to different people written by Y.I. Schneerson.

The *official documents* date mostly from the period when Y.I. Schneerson lived in the USSR, shedding light on his life in the Soviet Union. Among them are certificates given to Y.I. Schneerson by Soviet institutions: for instance, that he performed the duty of chief rabbi of Rostov

¹⁶ Op. 1, d. 63, ll. 1–25.

¹⁷ Op. 1, d. 64, l. 1.

¹⁸ Op. 1, d. 79, ll. 5–7.

¹⁹ Op. 1, d. 79, ll. 7–9.

²⁰ Op. 1, d. 79, ll. 70–75.

²¹ For instance, op. 1, d. 44, d. 47.

²² Op. 1, d. 48, l. 35; d. 55, ll. 59–60.

²³ Op. 1, d. 21, ll. 1–19.

²⁴ Op. 1, d. 48, ll. 121–125.

²⁵ Op. 1, d. 48, l. 149.

²⁶ Op. 1, d. 55, ll. 1–3.

²⁷ Op. 1, d. 40, ll. 56–59, for example.

²⁸ Op. 1, d. 40, ll. 43–45, for example.

²⁹ Op. 1, d. 34, ll. 5, 15.

³⁰ Op. 1, d. 34, l. 7.

³¹ Op. 1, d. 13.

³² Op. 1, d. 53, ll. 3–5.



in 1920³³ and that he was registered as a “religious worker” in the synagogue in 1924³⁴ and as a writer on Jewish religious philosophy³⁵ (1923). There is a license confirming his right to free settlement on the territory of the USSR³⁶ (1927). The archive contains different documents concerning Y.I. Schneerson’s arrest in 1927³⁷ and telegrams with demands for his release³⁸ (1927). From the same period are various official invitations, for instance, an invitation to take the post of rabbi in Riga³⁹ (1927) etc. There are almost no official documents from Latvia or Poland from the early or late 1930s.

Financial documents in Hebrew, Russian, English, German, French, Dutch etc. make up a significant part of the archive. Among them are numerous receipts — for example, of his rental payments in Leningrad⁴⁰ (1926) or fees for hotel rooms⁴¹ (1931) as well as lists of receipts and expenditures⁴², lists of creditors⁴³ and letters on the financial situation of the Sixth Lubavitscher Rebbe⁴⁴ (1935). The archive also includes tax documents such as an income declaration of Y.I. Schneerson⁴⁵ (1924) and bank documents⁴⁶. Financial records are the type of document that is almost equally represented for all the periods of the archive’s existence. They provide a great opportunity for examination of Chabad economic history in the first half of the 20th century.

The archive includes documents on the *Tomchei Tmimim yeshiva* in Warsaw (branch established in 1921) and other *Chabad yeshivot* — for example, the Torat Emet yeshiva in Jerusalem. Among them are the lists of students⁴⁷, their academic progress⁴⁸ and timetable⁴⁹ as well as the number of learning hours⁵⁰. The financial documents of the yeshiva include lists of receipts and expenditures⁵¹ and wage rates⁵². It could be fascinating to explore the organization and economics of the Chabad yeshivot using these documents — such research has not yet been conducted.

Several documents in the archive are concerned with the issue of the *Schneerson library* and attempts to recover it; there are official letters of R. Yoseph Yitzhak demanding the return of the library to him⁵³ (1927) as well as an official petition of the American Chabad community on the same issue⁵⁴ (1933). The archive includes a treaty concluded between R. Yoseph Yitzhak and

³³ op. 1, d. 5, l. 8

³⁴ Op. 1, d. 7, l. 1.

³⁵ Op. 1, d. 7, l. 7.

³⁶ Op. 1, d. 5, l. 1.

³⁷ Op. 1, d. 5, l. 1a.

³⁸ Op. 1, d. 5, l. 13.

³⁹ Op. 1, d. 20, ll. 221–222.

⁴⁰ Op. 1, d. 15, ll. 13–14.

⁴¹ Op. 1, d. 49, ll. 1–7.

⁴² For example, 1931, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 33–34; 1932, op. 1, d. 49, l. 38.

⁴³ For example, 1931, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 35, 117–119.

⁴⁴ Op. 1, d. 49, l. 53.

⁴⁵ Op. 1, d. 15, ll. 1–4.

⁴⁶ For example, 1931, op. 1, d. 31.

⁴⁷ 1931, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 10–18; 1934, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 57–61.

⁴⁸ 1934, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 62–63.

⁴⁹ 1931, op. 1, d. 49, l. 127a; 1933, op. 1, d. 49, l. 122a.

⁵⁰ 1935, op. 1, d. 49, l. 56.

⁵¹ 1934–1935, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 41–47, 48a–52.

⁵² 1933, op. 1, d. 49, l. 122ob.

⁵³ Op. 1, d. 5, ll. 2–3.

⁵⁴ Op. 1, d. 55, l. 47.



Samuil Viner about the acquisition of the Viner library⁵⁵ (1924) that was transferred from Poland to New York after the end of World War II, as well as the receipts: Y.I. Schneerson paid \$50 per month for the acquisition⁵⁶.

The archive also contains press cuttings mostly dating from the late 1920s and several dozen photographs. The people on the photographs for the most part are unidentifiable; however, there are also several photographs of the Sixth Lubavitscher Rebbe himself.

Conclusion

The Schneerson private archive is mentioned in scientific literature, for the most part, only in the context of cultural property restitution and litigation between Chabad Lubavich and the Russian Federation⁵⁷. However, besides being a legal case, the private archive of Rabbi Yoseph Yitzhak Schneerson is an invaluable historical resource providing material for research of different kinds, connected to the history of the Chabad movement in the first half of the 20th century, its organizational and economic aspects and evolution. The archive sheds light on many unexplored aspects of Jewish history, such as the leadership of the Hasidic movement or Jewish religious life under the Soviets and many others. Hopefully, the legal case of the Schneerson library and the Schneerson archive will not prevent researchers from using these archival materials in their work, because by discussing the collections seized by the Nazis or the Soviets only in terms of their capture, we unwittingly take the same perspective as the captors, depriving the collections of their internal cultural and historical content.

⁵⁵ Op. 1, d. 15, ll. 22–23.

⁵⁶ For instance, 1928–1930, op. 1, d. 15, ll. 27, 30, 33 etc.

⁵⁷ For instance, Talya Levi, “Russia and the Stolen Chabad Archive”, *Georgetown Journal of International Law* 46 (2015): 915–946.

