

# A Changing Landscape

## On The Go

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## 600-YEAR OLD LEIPZIG UNIVERSITY EXHIBIT HIGHLIGHTS A MIEVEAL JEWISH TREASURE

On September 9, **Horst Freitag**, consul general of the Federal Republic of Germany in New York, helped launch the exhibit "In Pursuit of Knowledge: Six Hundred Years of Leipzig University, 1409–2009" at the Grolier Club. Touting Leipzig's version of America's mantra "... the pursuit of happiness" — he said *that* was the imperative that helped sparked the Leipzig demonstrations that set the stage for the 1989 "fall of the Berlin wall." He underscored the point with an apt retro joke: "A man driving his car is stopped by the East German Stasi and told that his is the 10,000th car on the Autobahn and that he has won 10,000 Reichmarks. 'We are in a Socialist state' says the man. 'What good will the money do me? Aha! 'I'll finally get a license'; His wife tells the Stasi: 'Don't listen to what he is saying. He is completely drunk.' The grandmother in the back seat pipes up: 'See, I told you we'd never get far in a stolen car.' From the trunk came, 'Are we finally in West Germany?'" Freitag touted the exhibition's *Machsor Lipsiae* (the Latin for the exquisite 1320 Hebrew *Leipzig Machzor*), "one of the most beautiful examples of medieval bookmaking." Noting that in medieval times, the city had been a center of printing and publishing that included "a revolution in the printing of music, Arabic and Hebrew," Freitag paid homage to the city's "newly restored Jewish community of 1,300... 10 times smaller than Leipzig's prewar community." But what particularly intrigued me was the Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture. The institute was established in 1995 at the Leipzig University (following a resolution of the state parliament of Saxonia), and since 1999 it has been headed by Leipzig University professor of Jewish history and culture **Dan Diner**. Dubnow (1860–1941), considered the greatest Jewish historian of his time, was born in Mstislavl in what was then Belarussia. The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe describes Dubnow as "a Russian Jewish historian and ideologue of Jewish Diaspora nationalism.... His published works include the 10-volume 'World History of the Jewish People' which appeared in German, Hebrew and Russian and other translations in the 1920's and 1930's." The YIVO entry further notes: "He rejected socialism, especially the Marxist form.... He felt that Marxism wrongly held as all-important the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie whereas it was the Jewish people as a whole that was under antisemitic attack." After the 1925 founding of the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut in Vilna (Jewish Scientific Institute — now the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, located in New York City), Dubnow became a loyal supporter. In his autobiography, "Child of a Turbulent Century" (Northwestern University Press, 2006), Dubnow's grandson, Victor Erlich (an author and professor of Russian literature at Yale University who died in 2007 at 93 and spells the family name as Dubnov), writes about his grandfather: "It was a well-known fact that Dubnov was in the main a secular thinker... but his attitude toward Judaism had evolved since his rebellious

youth, when he was an *epikoyres*, a militant challenger of the rabbinical establishment.... [Though] he never became an observant Jew... he would attend the synagogue on the High Holidays, partly in deference to tradition, partly out of fondness for Kol Nidre (the song sung on the Day of Atonement). He found its symbolism particularly congenial and enjoyed celebrating it in the company of friends.” In the book, Erlich describes a Seder that the [Dubnov] family attended in the home of a Dr. Isaac Steinberg, “a figure among the Russian Jewish émigrés in Berlin.” He writes: “... the seder at the Steinbergs’ turned out... to be the most protracted Orthodox seder I ever attended.... As we were about to sit down at the table, the host produced skullcaps for all males present. My brother, who at 13 was a committed socialist and principled atheist, balked at the skullcap. The... tension was relieved by Dubnov’s quiet diplomacy. [Grandfather [who had had a bar-mitzvah] took Alex aside and said... ‘Believe me, I could just as well dispense with a skullcap myself, but since we are in Isaac’s house, we should respect his feelings.’ There was something beguiling about the spectacle of an architect of Jewish secular nationalism pleading with his teenage socialist grandson to show consideration for the religious beliefs of [Steinberg,] the first Soviet commissar of justice.”

Erlich, along with his mother and Dubnow’s daughter, Sophie [Zofia/Sonia] Erlich, and his wife, Iza — all Japanese visa recipients — were shipboard companions of my mother and me aboard the Japanese liner Heian Maru, which docked at Seattle on August 1, 1941. Victor, Sophie and Iza, along with my mother and I, are shown at the railing in a photograph that made the front page of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. The Erlich family, having made it to safety in America, could not have known then that just a month earlier, in July 1941, Simon Dubnow had been sent to the Riga ghetto, where, it was reported, he urged “*Yidn, schreibt un farshreibt* — Jews, write and record.” He was executed in Riga on December 8, 1941, and later buried in Riga’s old cemetery. The horrific news that Henryk Erlich, Sofia Dubnow Erlich’s husband and Victor Erlich’s father — a leader of the Jewish Bund — had taken his own life in one of Stalin’s prisons in May 1942 would not reach the family nor the world at large till much later. The Grolier Club’s In Pursuit of Knowledge exhibition, which runs through November, also includes a section of the “*Ebers Papyrus*, the largest surviving medical manuscript from antiquity, written in the 16th century BCE; parts of the oldest complete Bible manuscript, “*Codex Sinaitucus*”(circa 350); “The Mongolian Koran” (1305), and more. Speakers at the opening included **William Helfand**, president, of the Grolier Club; **Christoph Wolff**, Harvard University professor and director of the Bach Archives in Leipzig, and the exhibition’s curator, **Ulrich Schneider**, director of Leipzig University Library.

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