

Impressions of Schools and Learning:

Hanzi, age 17, female, from an unidentified small town near Vilna

“I attended the gymnasium once every three days, and even then I sat through the lessons day-dreaming. The teachers shouted at me, sometimes frequently. The mathematics teacher threatened me all the time, and once he said that instead of giving me a 5 he would now give me just a 2. I paid even less attention to mathematics. There were teachers who picked on me because I didn’t pay any tuition. In particular, the Bible teacher sent me to the principal’s office almost every week and reminded me that I had to do as I was told. I felt embarrassed before the principal; he was a decent man, who understood everything. Inside I felt like letting loose a torrent of words against all existing authority, but I stopped myself. It is difficult to be poor in today’s society.”

Khane, female, from Kaunas and various small towns including Panevėžys:

“When I learned 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. Once, when I saw a woman reading a Russian book, I went up to her and asked her to teach me to read. She laughed at me. But when I insisted, she taught me several letters. From then on, whenever I saw a piece of paper with writing on it, I looked for the familiar letters. I was happy if I found them.”

Excerpted from “Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland Before the Holocaust, ed. Jeffrey Shandler (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in cooperation with YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2002), 219, 224, 42.