VILNA, JERUSALEM OF LITHUANIA

by
LEYZER RAN
translated from the Yiddish by Marcus Moseley

The Fourth Annual Avrom-Nokhem Stencl Lecture in Yiddish Studies delivered before the Oxford Summer Programme in Yiddish Language and Literature on 18 August 1986

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S. S. Prawer's impression of Leyzer Ran

The inextinguishable yearning for Jerusalem, capital of Jewish national autonomy and creativity, accompanied Jews through all their wanderings and migrations. Wherever Jews were able to establish Jewish settlements and communities, the yearning for Jerusalem emerged, a nostalgia for the Jerusalem of the past and a desire to build a Jerusalem of the future. This 'reconstructive' process began with Sura and Pumbeditha in Babylonia and was followed by other communities: 'SHUM' (Hebrew initials for Speyer, Worms and Mainz) in Germany; Troyes and Carpentras in France; Cordova in Spain; Kiev (for the Kazars) in the Ukraine; Tatuan in Morocco; Salonica in Greece; Amsterdam (for the Marranos) in Holland; Prague in Bohemia; Lublin in Poland; Kovna in Zamot; Berditchev in Volhynia; to the Last Jerusalem of Lithuania — Vilna. Vilna was the Jerusalem of East European Jewry for three hundred years, until the Nazi Holocaust.

How was a community of a hundred thousand souls (at most) able to surpass many larger and wealthier Jewish communities and distinguish itself as the new Jewish Jerusalem? The quality of Jewish cultural life and Jewish cultural achievement tipped the scales in its favour.

When, by whom, and in what circumstances was Vilna actually recognized as a 'Jerusalem'? Two significant historical acknowledgements exist. The first occurred in 1812, when Napoleon Bonaparte occupied Vilna with his victorious army. This event deeply impressed itself in folk memory. Napoleon, so the story goes, before assuming residence in a palace, first stayed in the large home of a wealthy Vilna Jew. It was late at night, when Napoleon heard sobs emanating from the other end of the corridor where the Jew had his living quarters. Ordering two adjutants to accompany him, he found the Jew sitting on an overturned chair, weeping. 'What happened?', Napoleon asked, 'Has

anyone in my company mistreated or insulted you? If so, he will be severely punished!'

'No, Excellence, your men have nothing to do with this.'

— 'Why then are you sitting there in the middle of the night weeping?'

'Today is *Tishebov*' the Jew replied, 'the Jewish day of mourning for the destruction of our holy Temple. We commemorate this day with tears and prayers of lament.'

— 'I see', said Napoleon, 'but when and where exactly did this occur?'

'In Jerusalem, five hundred and eighty-seven years before the common era; that is, two thousand, three hundred and ninety-nine years ago.'

— 'Two thousand three hundred and ninety-nine years ago in Jerusalem and you sit down in Vilna tonight and weep?!!'

'Yes, your Excellency, Jews cannot and do not wish to forget the great loss thereby inflicted upon our people.'

Napoleon stood quietly a moment, looking at the Jew with amazement and admiration. Then he turned to one of his adjutants and said, 'A people who are capable of reliving a sad event which occurred two thousand four hundred years ago can survive forever, for as long as their historical memory serves them!'

Napoleon also visited the Great Synagogue in Vilna which he admired for its unusual and magnificent architecture. To commemorate his visit, he donated a *poroykhes* (the curtain covering over the ark where Torah scrolls are kept); this was preserved in the synagogue until the Holocaust. As Napoleon walked back through the narrow medieval streets of Vilna, he remarked that they reminded him of Jerusalem. From then on, one street actually came to be known as *Jeruzalimska Ulitsa* (or in Yiddish, *Ruzele*) and two suburbs came to be called the 'new' and 'little' *Yeruzalimki* (in Yiddish — *Yerusholayimkes*).

Vilna's second acknowledgement as a 'Jerusalem' came about

in the mid-seventeenth century. A rabbinical delegation from the *Kehile* (organized Jewish community) itself submitted a list bearing the names of three hundred and thirty-three Vilna scholars who knew the Mishnah by heart, to the Central Council of Jewish Communities. The number 333 is equivalent, in gematria, to the Hebrew word *sheleg* 'snow'. The senior rabbi of the Council rose and blessed the city of three hundred and thirty-three living 'Mishnahs' as a veritable 'Jerusalem of Lithuania' citing Job 37:6,

> For he says to the snow [i.e. *sheleg* = 333] be thou upon the earth.

Vilna thus maintained its illustrious '*sheleg* tradition' for Torah study until the Nazi Holocaust. The Central Council of Yeshivas in Vilna coincidentally came to represent three hundred and thirty-three Jewish towns and townlets. The Council oversaw all matters pertaining to Torah study and education. Meanwhile this '*sheleg* tradition' extended to the spheres of prayer and charity as well. Over the years, the sum total of little synagogues (*kloyzn*), houses of study (*botey-medroshim*) and prayer group quorums (*minyonim*) not only reached the symbolic number, *sheleg* but surpassed it. And likewise the number of alms-giving and charitable institutions.

In the sphere of charity, an extraordinary innovation was introduced. Each charitable society assumed responsibility for the fulfillment of one of the 248 positive commandments of Mosaic law and named itself after a Biblical citation referencing that particular commandment. Among the best known were *Soymekh Noflim* (support of the needy), *Royfe Khoylim* (healing of the sick) and *Matir Asurim* (liberation of prisoners).

What is unique to Vilna is the unusual number of individuals who undertook to become organizers, fundraisers and distributors of charity but who were themselves poor people, in the tradition of the proverbial *Lamed Vov*. For example, Benyomin the Chimney-sweep and his wife Alte, Shimele Kaftan and Dvoyre-Ester Gelfer not only assisted and gave aid to hundreds and thousands of paupers, but also provided the pupils of Vilna's

largest yeshiva with all their needs. Their charitable endeavours spanned over a century.

Secular Jewish Vilna also followed their example. In the catastrophic socioeconomic circumstances which reduced as much as one-half of the Jewish community to extreme poverty, Jewish self-help literally amounted to *pikuakh nefesh* — rescue from inevitable death. For example, in 1916 half of Vilna's sixty thousand Jews were unemployed and wholly reliant on communal support. The 'cheap kitchen' as it was called, in the first half of its fifty year existence (1893–1917), donated 7,376,768 free lunches.

Historical innovations within Jewish society, alongside developments in the external non-Jewish environment, facilitated radical changes in the traditional Jewish way of life in Eastern Europe. The Jerusalem of Lithuania was no exception. In Germany, the Reform branch of religious Judaism and the secular movement for enlightenment had both come into being. In the Russian Empire, the populist revolutionary mood of young Russian intellectuals who demanded democracy, international equality and the overthrow of the pernicious Czarist regime, fired the imagination of many Jews. The previously dormant and sporadic aspirations for long overdue reform in the Jewish community itself were likewise galvanized.

The *Haskalah* (Yiddish *Haskole*), the movement for 'Jewish enlightenment', which advocated secular education, became a bridge to the contemporary outside world. The movement for secularization soon split into a variety of splinter groups representing varying intellectual trends which attracted young and old alike from all sections of Jewish society. Vilna became a centre for all of them, a Jerusalem of modern Jewish secularism.

The more extreme wing of the *Haskalah* movement campaigned for Jewish assimilation into general Russian culture. The Czarist minister of education encouraged assimilatory tendencies amongst Jews and opened two official non-Orthodox rabbinical academies in Zhitomir and Vilna in 1847.

When the crown rabbinical school failed to open any doors in

the traditional Orthodox environment, the Russian authorities changed its name in 1873 from 'Rabbinic Institute of Studies' to 'Jewish Institute of Teachers' with the aim of preparing teachers for government elementary schools for Jewish children.

The Teachers' Institute spawned several revolutionary groups under the leadership of Aaron Zundelevitch; several members played an important part in the Russian and Jewish revolutionary movements. In a biographical anthology entitled *Activists in the Russian Revolutionary Movement* (Moscow 1927), published by ex-Czarist political prisoners, we find eighty-seven revolutionaries from Vilna, seventy-two of whom were Jewish, many of them former members of the revolutionary idealist circles of the Teachers' Institute.

Let us recall the names and activities of nine prominent Jewish revolutionaries: Vladimir (Benyomin) Yochelson (1855–1937), son of the Minsk crown rabbi, and Osip Minor (1861–1929) were both active members of the Central Committee of the largest revolutionary party in Russia (the S.R.). Yitskhok-Nakhmen Steinberg, the pious son and grandson of Vilna Talmudic scholars, represented the left wing of the S.R. party in the first Soviet regime. He was a Minister of Justice, the only Minister in the history of the Soviet Union to pray three times a day in the Kremlin. He broke with Lenin over the moral aspect of the revolution and became mentor to a group of ethical Jewish socialists in Vilna, the secular equivalent of rabbi Israel Salanter's *Musar* movement. Charles (Hanon) Rappaport (1865–1942), the child of wealthy but pious Chasidim, became the founder of the 'Union of Russian Social Revolutionaries' in Paris. Leyb Jogiches (1867–1919) was the grandson of a leader of the Vilna *Kehile* and nephew of a Czarist public prosecutor, later a Czarist general. Jogiches' *kloyz* (synagogue) was the veritable centre of Jewish religious life in the Vilna ghetto before the Nazi liquidation in 1943. Leyb (who used the pseudonyms Jan Tishko and Grazovsky) along with his wife Rosa Luxemburg, founded the left wing of the Polish Socialist Party and the 'Spartakus' group in Germany. Both Leyb and Rosa were victims of government

assassination. Shoul Seltz, grandson of the Vilna Rabbi, Shmuel Benyomin Seltz, was nominated by the Politburo as head of the Supreme Bolshevist Central Committee of the U.S.S.R. Mikhail Goldman, and his school friend Felix Dzierzhinsky cofounded the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party. Aaron Liebermann (1845–1880) organized the first Jewish Socialist Labour Union in London (1876). Liebermann wrote his first political manifesto to 'enlightened Jewish youth' and the first three issues of his socialist periodical, *HaEmet* ('The Truth') were written in Hebrew and distributed in Russia. Liebermann is considered the father of Jewish socialism.

The early attempts of the Czarist government and the *Maskilim* ('proponents of Haskalah') to assimilate Jewish youth into Russian culture were fruitless. The situation, however, changed radically in the 1930s with the compulsory assimilation programme of the Polish regime which imposed a systematic ban on Jewish schools. Jewish schools were replaced by Polish schools in which one hour, in Polish, was devoted to Jewish religion for 'those who observe the Sabbath'. Only those diplomas awarded by private Polish schools for Jewish children received official recognition.

A group of well-to-do industrialists, merchants and professionals, together with some odd Maskilim, all groups rarely seen in synagogue, nonetheless joined together in erecting a beautiful choral temple in 1902. A popular anecdote of the time stressed the pointlessness of this apparent return to faith. The old Maskil and eminent Yiddish story writer, Ayzik Meyer Dik, a member of the synagogue council, announced to the temple members that: 'Next year Yom Kippur prayers will commence at eight o'clock in the morning'. — 'After breakfast', pranksters would add. The final irony would occur forty years later, when Jewish Vilna would disappear; all her hundred *kloyzn* and study houses would be destroyed and the choral temple alone would survive the complete annihilation of the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania'. Ayzik Meyer Dik's anecdotal declaration would tragically echo over the graves of the reassembled non-worshippers in the Soviet 'Vilnius at Ponar'.

Vilna was also a centre for secular Hebraist Culture and the *Khibat Tsion* ('love of Zion') movement. The secular nationalists retained their love of the holy language and the holy land. This Vilna group devoted itself to the revival of Hebrew as a national spoken language accompanied by a secular literature and culture and of course, a return to the Land of Israel itself. Vilna became one of the most important centres of modern Hebrew literature. Mordechai Aaron Ginzberg (1796–1846), the creator of modern Hebrew prose, was followed by Joseph Klausner, the first and foremost of the secular Vilna scholars. The great Hebrew poets included Adam HaKohen (Abraham Dov Lebensohn, 1794–1878), author of an allegorical drama, *Emet veEmunah*, and his son 'Michal' (Michah Yosef Lebensohn, 1828–1852), the brilliant author of *Shirey Bat Tsion* and translator of Horace, Virgil, Schiller and Goethe. The most important poet of this group was 'Yalag' (Yehudah Leyb Gordon, 1830–1892). Kalman Shulman (1819–1899) was a Hebrew stylist, translator and historian renowned in his day.

The Maskilim of Vilna published important collections, among them *Pirkey Tsafon* (Hebrew for 'Fruits of the North') in 1841 and 1844 edited by Y.A. Horowitz and Sh. U. Finn. From 1860 to 1880 Finn also edited *HaKarmel* ('The Cultivated Field'). In addition, for the twelve year period spanning 1903–1915, a Hebrew daily paper, *HaZeman* ('The Time') appeared in Vilna. It offered monthly supplements in literature, art and scholarly works.

One young aspiring Hebrew poet, from an outlying village, upon seeing the Jews in Vilna who lived in basement dwellings, was so inspired by their spirit that between 1901 and 1906 he wrote seven Hebrew plays on the subject, thus becoming known as the Vilna 'poet of the cellar'. The first modern Hebrew dramatist was in fact also to become a famous Yiddish dramatist — Peretz Hirshbein (1880–1948). Between 1911 and 1916, professional Jewish actors in Vilna repeatedly mounted plays in Hebrew.

The First World War and the subsequent minor wars and occupations of Vilna (1918–1920) brought the richest and most

creative period of modern Hebrew literature in Vilna to an end. The creators, critics and scholars of Hebrew language and literature had disappeared.

The main achievement of the secular Zionist movement during the interwar decades was the education of a young, secular Hebrew speaking generation. This was achieved through the Hebrew school network of an education organization called *Tarbut* ('Culture'). Under its auspices one would find two kindergartens, five public schools, four high shools ('gymnasiums'), a Teachers' Seminary and a Frobel Seminary. The Hebrew poets Abraham Broides, Abba Kovner, Moshe Basok, and Zvi Rudnik were all products of the Hebrew schools, as were the historian Dr Israel Klausner and the writer M. Dvorzetsky. In Israel today, one finds ex-pupils of these schools holding the highest positions in the country, including ambassadors, consul generals, and former prime minister Shimon Peres.

Tarbut also sponsored various youth organizations, drama circles and music groups. From 1903 to 1940, almost one hundred Hebrew plays were presented in Hebrew schools and Jewish youth organizations. From 1918 onward, ten Hebrew journals were published; some only to surface once, others to be published regularly. Among them we find: *Galim* ('Waves', 1929–1930), *Mekhkarey Lashon* ('Linguistic Studies', 1930), *Zeramim* ('Currents', 1930) and *Tarbut* ('Culture', 1935).

Another important facet of Vilna was its Orthodox component which played a pioneering role in the development of the *Haskalah*, *Khibat Tsion*, and the workers' movements. Incredible as it may seem, the facts demonstrate that the Vilna of Jewish Orthodoxy was in many respects the initiator of the ideologies which were proclaimed and adhered to by the secular *Haskalah* a century later.

The Gaon ('genius') of Vilna, Rabbi Elijah (1720–1797), known in Yiddish as *Der Vilner Goen*, is considered the most significant and authoritative Talmudic commentator of his era. He was also a great innovator. Dismissing *pilpul*, he introduced his own teaching method, based on simplicity and clarity.

Through his advanced grammatical knowledge, he established the correct meaning of many problematic words in Talmudic literature. The Gaon's *Dikduk Eliahu* (Hebrew for 'Elijah's Grammar', Vilna and Horodna, 1833) and his *Kelaley HaDikduk Mehagra* (Hebrew for 'Grammatical Axioms of the Gaon Rabbi Elijah', 1840) became indispensable aids for students. The Gaon lifted the taboo on secular learning, maintaining that

> All sciences are necessary for the study of our Torah: algebra, geometry and even music which is essential for our understanding of Biblical cantillation and of the mysteries of the songs of the Levites and the *Tikuney Zohar*.
>
> (J. Shklover, *Pat HaShulkhan*, Jerusalem, 1911)

The Gaon authorized his pupil, Borukh Shklover to translate Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* into Hebrew. The Gaon himself wrote a book, *Ayil Meshulash* (Hebrew for 'a three year old ram', cf. Genesis 15:9) describing the basic principles of arithmetic, algebra, geometry and astronomy. Professor Yekuthiel Ginzburg in his book, *The History of Hebrew Mathematics* (Jerusalem, 1961) describes the Gaon's achievement thus:

> *Ayil Meshulash* is especially noteworthy for its precise scholarly style in comparison with all geometry books that have been written to this day. All Hebrew chrestomathies should include, among various other Hebrew sources, an example of the precise scholarly style of the Gaon, as a model to be emulated.

The Gaon set a precedent for scholarly study using non-Jewish sources. Talented young scholars soon followed his example.

In the Jewish living conditions of the day, the most important and urgently needed science was medicine. The first to return to Vilna with a medical degree from the University of Padua (the only university which at that time admitted Jews) was the scholar Aaron Gordon. While in Italy, he went to Venice to study Kabbalah with the renowned scholar Moses Chaim Luzzato. He later continued studying Kabbalah with Vilna scholars. Gordon was one of the organizers of a Chasidic prayer-house in the *Misnagdic* ('anti-Chasidic') 'Jerusalem of Lithuania'.

The most famous among the first qualified Jewish doctors in Vilna was Jacob Luboshitz, a doctor, diplomat and scholar who was active in community affairs. Rabbi Joseph Rosenson, a graduate of the Vilna Medical Academy, established an important practice in Vilna. A Hebrew scholar, he was appointed Censor, in which position he was of invaluable help to the Maskilim. His son, Moshe Rosenson, a linguist and wealthy landowner, published books and brochures advocating the unification of Jews, Christians and Muslims in a common faith.

Even more remarkable was the fact that pious Jewish girls studied in non-Jewish universities. They became particularly prominent in the fields of gynaecology and midwifery. Dr Esther Kinkulkin was the royal midwife in the court of Alexander I. Upon retirement, she was awarded the honorary rank of general. Fondly known as 'Esther the General', she lived to be a hundred years old.

Sarah Kaddish, who treated Jewish and non-Jewish women was nicknamed 'Sarah the Professor'. She also wrote a foreword to Levin Liondor's *French-Yiddish Dictionary* (Vilna 1836). The qualified midwife of the Vilna Academy of Medicine and Surgery, Malka Levenshtern-Berlant wrote (one hundred and fifty years ago!) a handbook in Yiddish on childbirth and hygiene called *The Happy Mother or an Experienced Teacher of Mothers*. It was published in Vilna in 1836 by Rabbi Benjamin Segal.

The first attempt to publish a Hebrew periodical in Vilna with a parallel Yiddish text was made by the Gaon's pupil, Menasseh of Ilya (*Menashe Iliyer*) (1767–1831). In 1823 he published his *Sama deKhayey/Lebn Mitl* (Hebrew/Yiddish for 'Elixir of Life'), of which only one issue appeared. As with the dawn of the *Haskalah*, so the dawn of the *Khibat Tsion* movement and the 'Aliyah from Vilna to Israel' belongs to the Gaon's followers. The Gaon himself undertook a journey to Israel but returned midway. His pupil, Rabbi Borukh Shklover organized and successfully completed the journey to Israel with three groups of the Gaon's followers from 1808 to 1810.

The organization of Jewish craftsmen began in Orthodox Vilna dozens of years before the appearance of the Jewish socialist movement. Craftsmen were organized in *kloyzn* (synagogues) according to professions. Provisions were made for each *kloyz* to have its own free loan society to provide financial aid to its needy members. Thirty craftsmen's *kloyzn* are mentioned in my list of two hundred and fifty synagogues and prayer groups in Vilna. When the Jewish labour movement later crystallized it began its activity in these free loan societies.

The *Haskalah* movement in Europe considered Moses Mendelssohn's (1729–1786) translation of the Bible into literary German, with his commentary, to be a remarkable achievement. In Vilna, Isaac Ben Yaakov published Mendelssohn's German Bible. Mendelssohn originally conceived of the translation as a means of providing his children with a Jewish education; ironically, not one of Mendelssohn's children remained Jewish. Similarly motivated, the merchant and scholar Abraham Danzig (1748–1820) brilliantly summarized the laws of the *Orakh Khayim* section of the *Shulkhan Arukh*, dealing with everyday life, in a simple Hebrew summary entitled *Khayey Adam* ('Life of Man'), first published in Vilna in 1810. Not only did children study the Yiddish translations of Danzig's books, but hundreds of societies dedicated to the study of *Khayey Adam* (*Khaye Odem* in Yiddish), were created throughout the Yiddish speaking world. His *Khokhmat Adam* ('Wisdom of Man'), first published in Vilna in 1812, likewise became a classic. It is based upon the *Yoreh Deah* section of the *Shulkhan Arukh*, dealing largely with dietary regulations. A supplement called *Binat Adam* ('Understanding of Man') on various Talmudic subjects, was appended to it.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Vilna became the 'Jerusalem' of Jewish Art in Czarist Russia. According to the prevailing discriminatory laws of Czarist Russia, admission to art schools was denied to all persons of non-Russian nationality, those professing a religion other than Russian Orthodoxy, the lower classes and women. The liberal Russian artist and

academician, Ivan Petrovich Trutniev (1821–1912) left the capital, St. Petersburg, for the poverty stricken multinational provincial town, Vilna, and opened an art school there. As an academician, Trutniev was directly answerable to the Central Academy of Art for all his undertakings in the field. Nevertheless, Trutniev ignored the discriminatory provisions made by the Ministry of Education and opened his art school to all, especially to those for whom the doors of other art schools in Russia remained closed. Tuition was free. The only provision was that any candidate for entry demonstrate some talent, no matter how undeveloped, for drawing, painting, engraving or sculpture in an entrance examination. During the forty-nine years of its existence (1866–1915), the Vilna art school admitted over five thousand students of all nationalities. There they acquired the rudimentary skills needed to develop their artistic talents.

To date I have succeeded in determining the names of some fifty important Jewish artists who received their first artistic training in Trutniev's art school in Vilna. According to some, their number exceeds one hundred. The overwhelming majority of those I have listed went on to perfect their talents in the most prestigious art schools and academies in Warsaw, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Paris, Berlin, Munich and Breslau. The names of some famous Jewish artists who were at various times matriculated in Trutniev's school will illustrate the central role that this institution played in the development of Jewish artists: Mordecai and Leib Antokolsky, Nachum Aaronson, Yosef Budka, Leopold Bernstein-Sinaieff, David Becker, Elias Grossman, Abraham Griliches, Ilya·Goldman, Ben Galas, Yosef Deitsch, Yaakov Lipschitz, Hayyim Soutine, Nachum Epstein, Moshe Maimon, Messenblum, Abel Pan, Mark Kadkin, Krestin, Pinhas Kremen, Baruch Shatz, William Schwartz, Ariel Stillman.

From 1919 to 1939, Jews who passed the entrance examinations were admitted to the Art Faculty of the University of Vilna. We have documentary evidence of forty-five Jewish artists and sculptors who completed the four year course and received diplomas.

The history of the Jewish artists of Vilna actually begins seventy years before Trutniev opened his art school. The first well-known draughtsman and portraitist belonged to the distinguished group of students of the Vilna Gaon. He was known by the name of *Der Kelpishker Poresh* (*poresh*, Hebrew *parush* means 'a man dedicated to self-imposed isolation for the purpose of immersion in sacred books'). His only surviving drawing is his portrait of the Gaon which he sketched in pencil while serving night duty in the parlour of the Gaon's private study. A lithograph made from this portrait has graced the walls of many Jewish homes.

In 1847 the well known Polish writer and historian of Vilna, Kraszewsky, published an extremely interesting story concerning the talented Jewish artist Yonah Palmer. Avner Griliches (1822–1905) and his son Abraham (1849–1912) were professional engravers, from a Vilna dynasty of professional Jewish engravers. The father and son, both well known for their fine artistic engravings in metal and jewelry, received appointments in the Czarist Royal Mint. Their bas-reliefs became famous.

The Vilna sculptor Mordechai Antokolski (1843–1902) and his protégé Ilya Ginzburg (1859–1939) were considered leading sculptors of the day in Russia. In the interwar period some fifty Jewish artists, painters, sculptors and draughtsmen exhibited their work in Vilna and other cities. Among them were the famous 'Young Vilna' artists Ben, Moyshe Vorobeitchik-Raviv, Moyshke Bahelfer, Dovid Labkovsky, Rokhl Sutzkever, Raphael Chvolles, B. Michtam and Sheyne Ephron. Twenty-four artists are known to have received their art training through the 'Help Through Work' art school, fourteen in the Polish art schools in Vilna and Warsaw. Eighteen young artists, of whom only the youngest survived, even exhibited in the Vilna Ghetto. He is the famous surrealist, Shmuel Back.

The following are among the most prominent Vilna Jewish artists. Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), an art critic, was an acclaimed expert on the art of the Italian Renaissance. Yitzhak Itkind (1871–1969) survived three arrests and 'liquidations'. He

continued his artistic work until his death in exile in Alma-Atta. Lazar Segal (1891–1905) was the son of Abba the Scribe. The 'Lazar Segal Museum' in Saõ Paulo, Brazil is a national museum containing 2,810 of Segal's paintings, etchings and sculptures; it was founded in 1965 by his Vilna-born wife, Dzheni Klabin and is now directed by their two sons. Lydia Aschheim Boruchson (1923–killed during the Holocaust) was curator of the Breslau Museum. She was the author of important works on art and philosophy. Professor Jacob Goldblatt (1860–1929) was the author of a major work, *Art of the Jews and other Ancient People.* Unfortunately, his manuscript was lost during the Holocaust.

Vilna was also the city where Jewish revolutionaries, loyal sons and daughters of oppressed workers, finally brought socialist ideals to their 'brothers and sisters in toil and need'. The founding convention of the General Jewish Labor *Bund* of Russia, Poland and Lithuania took place in a garret in Vilna in 1897. The *Bund* brought knowledge, courage and the hope for a better future. The inarticulate masses found their voice in unions, strikes, proclamations, demonstrations and arrests.

I was seven or eight years old when my father took me into the woods where, for the first time, I heard what seemed to me to be an entire forest of Jewish workers, men and women, singing the Bund's anthem *Di Shvue* ('The Oath') — 'We swear to conquer the dark night or fall bravely on the battle field'.

In 1902 the shoemaker Hirsh Leckert shot at the Vilna governor, Von Wahl, in revenge for the flogging of Jewish workers who took part in a May Day demonstration. Leckert's heroic assassination attempt and subsequent death by hanging, inspired the Jewish workers. They established underground, clandestine fighting units for self-defence.

During the 1905 Revolution, fourteen people were killed in Vilna. Jews, workers, socialists and liberals of all nationalities took part in the funeral demonstration. So as to prevent any further incidents, the governor agreed to remove the police from the city. The Bundist, 'Comrade Aaron' (the young Yiddish

dramatist, A. Vayter — Devenishsky) with the help of the Bundist self-defence units, assumed responsibility for maintaining order throughout that day. When the first Soviet Workers' Council was founded in Vilna, in 1918, three of its five member steering committee were Jews — its Secretary, Yulis (Shimelevitch), Yankal Ahss and A. Kunigas (Laudansky).

After the *Bund* other Jewish socialist and socialist-nationalist movements appeared — *Tseirey Tsion*, *Poaley Tsion*, Zionist socialists, Sejmists, the Democratic People's Party and others. There was a time when the majority of Jewish movements in Russia, their journals and Central Committees were all located in Vilna. The open debates among splinter groups and united parties, the constant discussions among their supporters and opponents attracted more and more listeners. There was also a sharp increase in broadsheets (legalized in 1905). Journals began to appear by the hundreds. From 1906 to 1940 thirty daily Yiddish newspapers appeared. Jewish and general news, domestic and foreign issues of the day were brought into the Jewish home. Porters and cab drivers glanced at a paper between journeys and saleswomen swapped sensational stories gleaned from the daily press.

In Vilna, the evolution of Yiddish folklore into new literary formats was a natural process. The most popular Yiddish folksinger and songwriter was Elyokem Badkhn or Tsunzer (Zunser), as he liked to sign his name in the small one-kopek booklets of his popular printed songsheets. Musicals performed in Yiddish soon came to be accepted as a natural continuation of the beloved *Purimshpil* ('Purim play').

The didactic stories of Ayzik Meyer Dik became popular. Even more popular were those of the later, more secular writer 'Shomer' (Sheikewitz). They were seen as the natural sequel to the moral tales recounted by the Dubnow *Magid* and the '*kloyz* preacher' Rabbi Ben-Tsion Alfas, in his pious booklet *Maaseh Alfas (Mayse Alfes* in Yiddish). Dik and Shomer wrote over five hundred stories and novellas depicting Jewish and non-Jewish life. They in fact laid the basis for the later mass readership of

modern Yiddish literature. Thus the doors were opened wide to a renewal of Jewish life. Unexpected guests streamed in.

The best Yiddish theatre companies were frequent and welcome guests in Vilna and the lectern was always prepared for the superb reciter of Yiddish literature, Herts Grossbard. Grossbard gave fifty public readings of Yiddish literature in Vilna. He caused a sensation in one venue in particular called 'Our Theatre' in Novigorod, an area known for its indigents, mendicants and underworld characters. Who amongst these would go to hear Grossbard's Saturday morning readings? The auditorium was packed with curious 'Novigorod' Jews, who were rendered speechless with admiration when they heard him recite the writings of Yiddish authors, enacting them word for word in their daily language. It was a virtuoso performance.

Hundreds of students made their literary début in the handwritten periodicals and mimeographed journals of the Vilna Yiddish schools. Before long, many of these same students would graduate to writing for Yiddish newspapers and periodicals. Zalmen Reyzen, the great Yiddish scholar and one of the leading patrons of Yiddish talent in Vilna, provided one gifted group of 'Vilnerites' with a literary address. He devoted an entire page of his newspaper, the *Vilner Tog* to the *Yung Vilne* ('Young Vilna') group in 1929. Half of the members of this group were either orphans or bereft of one parent. The Jewish schools, the teachers, the youth organizations, Jewish Vilna itself, became their guardians. Avrom Sutzkever and Chaim Grade went on to become leading lights of Yiddish literature. Their contemporaries, Leyzer Wolff, Shimshn Cahan, A. Wogler, Perets Miransky, Sh. Katzcherginsky and the youngest of the group, Hirsh Glik, all have assured places in the canon of contemporary Yiddish literature.

The members of *Yung Vilne* constituted but one section, albeit a significant one, of the last creative Jewish generation in Vilna itself. The majority of Vilna Jewry perished in the Holocaust. It would be a grave omission to assess the achievement of Vilna as a 'Jerusalem of Yiddish' without giving some account, although sketchy, of this important lost generation.

Over the last forty odd years since the Holocaust, I have succeeded in collecting reliable biographical and bibliographical information and documents concerning the life and work of this generation. Not only does this help to ensure that the memory of their achievements will be preserved. It also demonstrates how rich Yiddish Vilna was in talent. I will give only a brief statistical survey organized according to the areas of specialization of the individuals concerned. The literary youth group *Yung Vilne* (1929–1941) consisted of eleven poets, three novelists, one songwriter and six painters. Its 'even younger' sister group, *Yungvald* (1936–1941) boasted five poets and one painter. Members of various Yiddish cultural and artistic movements include thirty-two poets, eighteen songwriters, ten novelists, three feuilletonists, five essayists, twenty-eight publicists and journalists, sixteen writers for the theatre (two of dramas, four of musicals, five of revues, three of marionette shows, two of stage adaptations). There were, moreover, fourteen children's writers (seven of songs, four of plays and three of textbooks). There were five educationalists, four bibliographers, five folklorists and ethnographers, eighteen historians, four economists, two specialists in Jewish agriculture, seven in literature, six in linguistics, three in German studies, three in art and several in astronomy, botany and Biblical studies. The list, far from complete, demonstrates the extraordinary creativity of the Vilna of yesterday as well as the immense potential that the 'Jerusalem of Yiddish' might have realized. It also highlights the void left after its destruction for another generation to fill.

The Yiddish schools established after the First World War developed into an entire educational network encompassing seven kindergartens, ten elementary schools, four secondary schools and a Jewish Teachers' Seminary. It was here that the sons and daughters of the poor received their first Jewish education along with a glass of milk and a roll during the class break. At the same time a network of schools for professional training, trade schools and courses for the young and for adults came into being. These were organized by ORT and 'Help Through Work'. Thousands of students received their profes-

sional training and general education in Yiddish in these schools, as well as in special schools offering courses in nursing for girls and electronics and mechanics for boys. Art schools were established for painters and sculptors. There were schools of theatre and ballet and a music conservatory which prepared candidates for the Vilna Opera Ensemble (1922–1940).

On the occasion of the opening of Vilna's first Jewish Secondary School where Yiddish was the language of instruction, in February of 1920, the Yiddish writer, H. D. Nomberg, wrote in the visitor's book:

> My wish is that Vilna, the Lithuanian Jerusalem, which has given us the first Yiddish Junior College may have the honour of giving us the first Jewish University — Bravo, Vilna intelligentsia!

In 1925, Nokhem Shtif, Max Weinreich, Zalmen Reyzen and other leading Yiddish scholars founded the world's first university-level Yiddish academy, the Yivo (so called after the Yiddish acronym for *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut* 'Yiddish Scientific Institute'). Yivo established sections for philology, history, economics and demography, ethnography and folklore, and bibliography, each of which produced impressive series of scholarly publications. Yivo's *Aspirantur* trained young scholars in all these fields. Another higher educational institute, the Vilna Yiddish Teachers' Institute, turned out some one hundred and twenty graduates, who went on to direct Yiddish schools around the world.

In 1916, a group of talented Yiddish actors founded the *Vilner Trupe* (Vilna Theatre Company) and made history. This was the first Jewish theatre company to tour Europe and North America bringing to Jews and non-Jews living testimony of a modern Yiddish culture via its superb performances of Jewish plays. The *Vilner Trupe* was the first to introduce a play by Sh. An-ski, *The Dybbuk*, into world literature.

I conclude with a poem by Avrom-Nokhem Stencl after whom this lecture is named:

א.נ. שטענצל

ווילנע

אַ ירושלים של מעלה אויף דער ערד,
דאָס איז געווען פֿאַר אונדז ווילנע די שטאָט;
דער גיסט נאָך פֿון גאון געשוועבט האָט איבער איר,
מיט עקשנות, הייליקער און מיט ענאָד.

די פשטות פֿון אַ וילנער ביתֿ־מדרש יידן,
איבער אַ שטיקל „בעל עקידה" פֿאַרקלערט:
די וועלט מיט איר גאָרער האַרבקייט ר'איז זיך מסביר,
אין דעם מענטשנס טון אויף דער זינדיקער ערד.

מיט זיבנע טשוועקעס אין זויל אַרײַן שלאָגנדיק,
חזרט אַ שוסטער אַ „חיי־אדם" דין — —
און זײַן געזעל אַנ—סקיס „שבועה" צוזינגענדיק,
איז מטעים פֿון אמתֿן לעבן דעם זין.

און עפּעס אַ בחור אין „ייוואָ" זיצנדיק,
איבער אַ כתּב־יד פֿון אײזיק מאיר דיק,
אַ פּינטעלע אונטער אַ יוד נישט צו פֿאַרזען,
יעדער קונציקער צוק פֿילט אים אָן מיט גליק.

דאָ נאָך האָב איך געטראָפֿן אַ וילנער גלעזער,
זײַן גאַנצע שטאָט געטראָגן האָט ער אויף זיך!
דערזענדיק אים, פֿלעג איך אים מוזן נאָכגיין,
און געדאַכט האָט זיך, כ'גיי נאָך טריט פֿון משיח — — —

אַ ירושלים של מעלה אויף דער ערד,
דאָס איז געווען פֿאַר אונדז ווילנע די שטאָט!
און אין אונדזערע הערצער, אַ געהייליקטע,
בליבן די וועט אַזוי לעולם ועד.

(from A. N. Stencl, ed., *Vilna Yerusholayim deLite* ['Shtentsls heftlakh', later *Loshn un Lebn*], no. 55, p. 3, London, August 1944)

Elinor Robinson has translated Stencl's poem into English:

Vilna

A heavenly Jerusalem on the earth
Was the city of Vilna to us.
The spirit of the Gaon swept over it still
With sacred stubbornness and grace.

The simplicity of a Jew in the House of Study,
Pondering a passage in *Bal Akeyde*,
Interpreting the world in all its hardness:
Men's actions upon the sinful earth.

Hammering nails into a sole,
A shoemaker recites a law from *Khaye Odem*;
His apprentice, singing An-Ski's "Oath",
Savours the meaning of true life.

And some young fellow, sitting in Yivo,
With a manuscript by Ayzik-Meyer Dik,
Won't miss a dot under a *yud* —
He is filled with joy by each artful stroke.

I met a Vilna glazier here,
Carrying with him his whole city;
When I saw him, I used to follow him round —
I was following the Messiah, it seemed.

A heavenly Jerusalem on the earth
Was the city of Vilna to us,
And in our hearts, a holy place,
It will for ever and ever remain.

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