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## Touring Vilna: Images of the City and its Jews in Guidebooks and Travelogues, 1856–1939<sup>1</sup>

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*Annotation:* From the mid-19th century through the end of the interwar period, a variety of texts about Vilna were published to guide and inform both tourists and armchair travellers. The Polish, French and German-language guidebooks and travelogues considered in this article were composed both by native sons and visitors who wished to share their impressions of the city, its notable sights, and its residents. While some overlooked the presence of Jews, most devoted some space to Vilna's Jewish landmarks. Overwhelmingly, they focused their attention on the Jewish quarter, the traditional heart of Jewish life, although a minority ventured to newer neighbourhoods, where they discovered a vibrant modern community. Their attitudes included a mix of sympathy, fascination and revulsion; many employed the language of orientalism, even as they invested that language with a variety of meanings. These authors' narratives were shaped by their views of the various groups that comprised Vilna's diverse population, as well as by commitments ranging from Polish nationalism to pacifism. Such accounts thus illuminate competing visions of the larger society and the place of Jews within it.

*Keywords:* Vilna, guidebooks, travelogues, Jewish quarter, YIVO, orientalism.

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## Introduction

In his monumental work *Toyznt yor Vilne*, Zalmen Szyk provides a unique portrait of his native city, known variously as Vilna, Wilno and Vilnius, that combines features of a history, guidebook and bibliography.<sup>2</sup> Szyk's publication is distinctive not only for its level of detail (at over 500 pages, it was only the first of two volumes planned), but for its inclusion of all the many ethnic and religious groups that historically comprised the population of this famously multicultural city. Writing in Yiddish in 1939, Szyk gave pride of place to the Jewish minority, while mirroring the diversity that to liberals represented the best of Vilna's legacy.

Szyk, of course, was hardly alone in his efforts. Many authors writing in a variety of languages were drawn to the city's rich history, cultural life and architecture. From at least the mid-19th century, when the arrival of the railroad in 1860 made travel to the city much easier, and with increasing frequency until the end of the interwar period, guidebooks and travelogues were available to introduce both tourists and armchair travellers to Vilna and its surrounding region. Such texts were composed both by native sons like Szyk and by visitors who wished to share their impressions of the city, its notable sights and its residents.<sup>3</sup> Szyk, writing in a Jewish language for Jewish readers, documents sympathetically Vilna's multifaceted population. By contrast, non-Jewish authors writing primarily for non-Jewish audiences in languages such as Polish, French and German vary in their attitudes to this diversity in general and to the city's Jewish minority in particular.

Most devote some space, however limited, to Vilna's Jewish sights. Overwhelmingly, they focus their attention on the Jewish quarter, the triangular area in the heart of the city that was colloquially called 'the ghetto' by Jews and non-Jews alike. This neighbourhood had been the centre of Jewish life since at least 1633, when Władysław IV attempted to restrict Jews' residence to a few streets there.<sup>4</sup> In the years after the First World War, Jewish settlement spread to other

2 Zalmen Szyk, *Toyznt yor Vilne*, Vilna: Gezelshaft far landkentenish in poyln, vilner opteylung, 1939. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, I refer to the city as Vilna except in direct quotes from sources.

3 For a study of the city as portrayed in accounts by visitors, see Laimonas Briedis, *Vilnius: City of Strangers*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2009.

4 Israel Cohen, *Vilna*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1943, reprint 1992, p. 30–31.

areas west of downtown; in particular, more modern and secular institutions were located in these newly developed parts of the city.<sup>5</sup> The Jewish quarter became increasingly dominated by the most impoverished and traditional elements of the population. Nevertheless, it remained the symbolic heart of the community and the home of its most revered institutions, such as the shulhojf (synagogue courtyard), where the Great Synagogue and the Strashun Library were located.

Most observers considered the Jewish quarter part of the standard itinerary for all visitors, as they were fascinated by its picturesque topography and its residents' distinctive appearance. Its narrow winding streets, some spanned by arches, became an enduring symbol of the city for Jews and non-Jews alike. Still, some chose to minimise or even ignore the presence of Jews, who comprised between approximately 30 and 50 percent of Vilna's population during the period from the 1860s to the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, those who included the neighbourhood in their writing, and in their recommended tours for visitors, exhibited a wide range of attitudes even as they evoked familiar tropes. A few did venture to newer neighbourhoods, where they encountered a vibrant modern Jewish culture. All these accounts were coloured by their authors' views, in particular their sympathies and antipathies to the various groups that comprised Vilna's diverse population. They thus illuminate a range of perspectives not only on Vilna's Jews, but on the very idea of Vilna as a multicultural city.

## Polish writers under Russian rule

Polish-language guidebooks published during the period of the partitions, when Vilna was under Russian rule, mirror the rise and fall of Polish-Jewish solidarity.

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5 Cecile E. Kuznitz, 'On the Jewish Street: Yiddish Culture and the Urban Landscape in Interwar Vilna', in: *Yiddish Language and Culture: Then and Now*, Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1998, p. 77–82.

6 The Jewish population grew from approximately 24,448 in 1860 (41% of the total population) to 38,900 in 1875 (47%), to 61,847 in 1897 (40%). It increased to as much as 85,000 in 1903 (52%), before declining to 46,500 in 1920 (36%), and 55,000 in 1931 (29%). Figures from Aliza Cohen-Mushlin, et al., *Synagogues in Lithuania, N-Ž, A Catalogue*, Vilnius: Academy of Arts Press, 2012, p. 240 except for 1903 figure from Mordechai Zalkin, 'Vilnius', in: *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gershon David Hundert, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 1974.

One of the earliest, first appearing in 1856, was written by Adam Honory Kirkor. Kirkor lived in Vilna for only two decades or so but took a strong interest in local history and ethnography, even conducting his own archaeological excavations. He published several newspapers and founded a press that produced books in Polish and Lithuanian.<sup>7</sup> Kirkor's *Przechadzki po Wilnie i jego okolicach* (Strolls through Wilno and its Region) is organised as a series of walks highlighting sights of historic and aesthetic interest.<sup>8</sup> The third 'stroll' begins on Niemiecka (German) Street and makes its way to the Jewish quarter, where 'several more or less curving, narrow lanes, primarily inhabited by Israelites, wind in a zigzag.'<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Kirkor notes that this part of the city 'was called *the black city* in the old days', using a term that frequently reappears in non-Jewish sources.<sup>10</sup> The author then takes the reader past two nearby churches on the way to two local Jewish landmarks, the Great Synagogue and the Jewish hospital, and ends his chapter with a tale of a 'haunted store' in Leyb Leyzer's courtyard.<sup>11</sup> Rather than isolating Jewish landmarks, Kirkor's itinerary thus integrates them into the cityscape on a narrative level as he takes the armchair traveller on a tour that interweaves Jewish and Christian sights.

Kirkor's text describes the poverty of the Jewish quarter, while also introducing an aura of mystery:

Along the streets and lanes there are many old masonry houses with courtyards of various sizes, with stairs steep as a straight ladder that are a terrible sight, narrow and often without a handrail, wobbly from rotting porches, with passages connecting one alley with another, with secret stores, with underground corridors. Everywhere in these decaying, dark houses live a great number of poor families shrouded in rags . . . Some of these buildings were so old that they disintegrated and collapsed into a heap of rubble, thankfully crushing only a few of their poor unlucky inhabitants.<sup>12</sup>

7 Tomas Venclova, *Vilnius, A Guide to its Names and People*, Vilnius: R. Paknio leidykla, 2009, p. 162.

8 The book was reprinted over the next few decades, and later editions had a significantly different format. On an edition published in 1880, see Theodore R. Weeks, *Vilnius Between Nations, 1795–2000*, DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015, p. 81–82.

9 Adam Honory Kirkor, *Przechadzki po Wilnie i jego okolicach*, Wilno: M. Orgelbrand, 1859, p. 87.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 87–88. Italics in original.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 90–91.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 88. I thank Piotr Nazurek for his help with translating this passage.

This passage introduces several themes that will reappear in later accounts, most notably the decrepitude of the area. While Kirkor hardly makes the neighbourhood seem an appealing destination for the visitor to Vilna, he nevertheless evokes compassion for its impoverished inhabitants. This reflects the mood of the period prior to the failed Polish uprising of 1863, when relations between Poles and Jews were at their zenith. In addition, Kirkor was known for his sympathy for the tsarist authorities, and thus presumably did not share a common prejudice against Jews as allies of the hated Russian occupier.<sup>13</sup>

Such a negative view did colour two guidebooks originally published in 1910, in the waning years of tsarist rule, that reflect the subsequent decline in Polish-Jewish relations. Władysław Zahorski, a medical doctor and avid amateur historian, minimises the Jewish presence in Vilna.<sup>14</sup> He focuses on Polish sights and devotes little space to landmarks associated with other groups in the city. For example, the Great Synagogue and the Choral Synagogue are included among a much longer list of primarily Catholic religious institutions.<sup>15</sup> In his tour of the city, Zahorski does mention in passing some commonly overlooked Jewish institutions outside the Jewish quarter, such as the Jewish hospital on Pozawalna Street (also noted by Kirkor) and the Jewish Teachers Seminary on Orzeszkowa Street.<sup>16</sup> He also includes a brief entry on the Jewish quarter itself, recommending a visit to the area's narrow byways and dim stores while remarking that 'the bustle and din that prevail in this ghetto cannot be described.'<sup>17</sup>

While Zahorski largely ignores Jewish sights, W. Gizbert, a prominent member of the city's Calvinist community, takes a more openly hostile attitude.<sup>18</sup> He includes a brief discussion of the Jewish quarter, focusing on the major landmarks of the Great Synagogue and the Strashun Library.<sup>19</sup> Yet missing from his account is any description of the residents of these streets. Gizbert does single

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13 Venclova, p. 162.

14 Ibid., p. 226.

15 Dr Władysław Zahorski, *Przewodnik po Wilnie*, Wilno: J. Zawadzki, 1923, p. 162. This guidebook was also reprinted several times. On this text, see Weeks, p. 142–143.

16 Zahorski, p. 55, 64.

17 Ibid., p. 30–31.

18 Weeks, p. 82. This author, whose full name was Waclaw Gizbert-Studnicki, was also a contributor to the compendium *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska* discussed below.

19 W. Gizbert, *Wilno: Przewodnik ilustrowany po mieście i okolicach z planem miasta i dodatkami*, Wilno: A Żukowski i W. Borkowski, 1910, p. 186–191.

out for mention two prominent figures born in the neighbourhood: the artist Mark Antokolsky and Julian Klaczko, a Polish writer and convert to Catholicism whom he praises as a ‘Polish patriot’.<sup>20</sup> The reference to Klaczko is telling, for elsewhere Gizbert reveals an animosity towards Jews that seems linked to the rise in Polish–Russian tensions by this period. He writes that, following their settlement in the city in the late 16th century, ‘In a short time Jews established themselves as dangerous competitors to Christian merchants.’<sup>21</sup> He acknowledges that anti-Jewish violence was not unknown in this period, but maintains that the Polish authorities lived up to their promise to protect Jews and punish those who disturbed the peace.<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere in the text he portrays the Jewish community as a whole, in implicit contrast to Klaczko, as favouring Russian over Polish culture.<sup>23</sup> The inference is clear: despite their favourable treatment by the Poles, Vilna’s Jews are an untrustworthy element that has allied itself with the hated Russian rulers. In this way, these guidebook authors lead their readers on a tour not only of Vilna’s sights, but of the labyrinth of relations between local Poles, Jews and Russians.

### **Locals and visitors in independent Poland**

Attention to Vilna increased in the aftermath of the First World War, when political rule over the city and its region was disputed between the revived Polish state and newly independent Lithuania. As before, many writers stressed the locale’s Polish character, now to underscore its rightful place in the Second Polish Republic. One Polish writer adopted Zahorski’s approach but took it to an extreme, choosing simply to ignore the presence of Jews. The historian Henryk Mościcki’s brief Polish-language overview of the city’s history and sights, published in 1922, focuses on Vilna’s role in Polish culture and omits any mention of its non-Christian minorities. Its illustrations by the well-known

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20 Ibid., p. 68. After 1919, the municipal authorities renamed a street in the Jewish quarter after Klaczko, an act that was opposed by the Jewish community. See Kuznitz, ‘Jewish Street,’ p. 67–70.

21 Gizbert, p. 25–27.

22 Ibid., p. 187.

23 Ibid., p. 9.

photographer Jan Bułhak include one image of the Jewish quarter, but there is no mention of the neighbourhood in the text.<sup>24</sup>

Most guidebooks, by contrast, did devote some space, however limited, to Jewish sights in the city. A popular Polish-language text was published the next year by Juljusz Kłos, a prominent Warsaw-born architect and art critic who taught at the university in Vilna.<sup>25</sup> Kłos recognises the diversity of Vilna's population, while emphasising the city's Polish identity.<sup>26</sup> For example, a lengthy section on religious institutions includes descriptions of 26 Catholic churches and 11 other houses of worship, including two synagogues.<sup>27</sup> Kłos also affirms the place of the Jewish quarter as a tourist destination, albeit of secondary importance.<sup>28</sup> In his suggested itineraries, he lists the neighbourhood as recommended for visitors on their second day in the city, along with other sights related to the German and Lithuanian minorities. This contrasts with Szyk's *Toznt yor Vilne*, where the Jewish quarter is considered a must-see for visitors with only half a day to spend in Vilna.<sup>29</sup>

24 Henryk Mościcki, *Wilno*, Warsaw: F. Hoesick i Wilno: Zawadzki, 1922. Bułhak's photographs were also used in the book by Jerzy Remer discussed below.

25 Venclova, p. 253.

26 Juljusz Kłos, *Wilno: Przewodnik Krajoznawczy*, Wilno: Wydawnictwo Oddziału Wileńskiego Polsk. Tow. Krajoznawczego, 1923. Marcos Silber asserts that Kłos wrote his book in response to Zahorski's. Marcos Silber, 'Sightseeing and Nearsightedness: Tours in Vilna of the Late 1930s and the Right to the City', in: *Konstellationen über Geschichte, Erfahrung und Erkenntnis: Festschrift für Dan Diner zum 65. Geburtstag*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2011, p. 131. On Kłos, see Silber, p. 132–137; Weeks, p. 144–145; Samuel Kassow, 'Travel and Local History as a National Mission', in: *Jewish Topographies*, eds. J. Brauch, A. Lipphardt, A. Nocke, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2008, p. 247–248; Mindaugas Kvietauskas, 'Heterotopia międzywojennego Wilna: dyskursy krajoznawcze i literackie', in: *Żagary: Środowisko Kulturowe Grupy Literackiej*, eds. Tadeusz Bujnicki, Krzysztof Biedrzycki, Jarosław Fazan, Kraków: Universitas, 2009, p. 217–218.

27 Kłos, p. 183–184. Silber writes that Kassow is mistaken in claiming that Kłos briefly mentions the Choral Synagogue. However, it is included in the 1923 edition but omitted from later editions.

28 As Weeks notes, later editions single out Julian Klaczko as the only former resident of the neighbourhood mentioned by name. Weeks, p. 145. Perhaps this is because a street discussed by Kłos had by this time been renamed after Klaczko.

29 Kłos, p. 247; Szyk, p. 6. On this point, see Silber, p. 134; Cecile Esther Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture: Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 137.

In his description of the neighbourhood, Kłos paints a now-familiar portrait of ‘old, cramped, and dark houses from centuries past, surrounded by countless passageways in one extremely complex labyrinth’.<sup>30</sup> After noting the area’s most interesting streets and buildings, like other authors Kłos invokes its unsanitary atmosphere. Yet he goes further in extending these negative associations to the residents themselves. He warns his readers who might venture there: ‘Even though the quarter has certain charms, this is weakened by the typical oriental slovenliness of the inhabitants of this unhygienic quarter, and by an intolerable stench.’<sup>31</sup> Rather than Jewish poverty evoking sympathy, as it does for Kirkor, here it inspires a sense of revulsion. Moreover, Kłos introduces a new variation on the image of Jews as an exotic presence: his description of them as ‘oriental’ underscores both their supposed lack of Western standards of hygiene and their essential foreignness. Kłos advises against a visit to the neighbourhood in the summer heat, when the pervasive odour makes it especially unpleasant ‘for a cultured European to visit these lanes’.<sup>32</sup> Thus, he portrays the Jews as an alien element in the city, while asserting the place of his Polish-language readership within the circle of civilised Westerners.

Two accounts by visitors to the city – both, as it happens, by Frenchwomen – present yet other contrasting views. Rosa Bailly, a writer, translator of Polish literature, and lifelong Polonophile, founded the Amis de la Pologne (Friends of Poland) in 1919.<sup>33</sup> In 1923, the same year that Kłos’ volume appeared, she published the French-language *Guide de Pologne* (Guide to Poland).<sup>34</sup> The book’s chapter on Vilna includes figures showing that over a third of the city’s population at the time was Jewish.<sup>35</sup> Yet the only local Jewish institutions it mentions are two synagogues, the Great Synagogue and the Choral Synagogue. In her discussion of the so-called ghetto, Bailly recommends a visit in these ambivalent terms: ‘The Jewish quarter, called the “black city”, very picturesque,

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30 Kłos, p. 217.

31 Ibid., 218. Translation taken from Kassow, p. 247.

32 Kłos, p. 218.

33 Anita Pytlarz, ‘Rosa Bailly – sa vie et les liens d’amitié tissés avec la Pologne’, in: *Synergies – Pologne*, eds. Małgorzata Pamuła and Anita Pytlarz, Krakow: Colonel, 2006, p. 69–83.

34 In the same period, Bailly also published a pamphlet on Vilna arguing for the city’s incorporation into Poland entitled *Vilno: ville polonaise*.

35 [Rosa Bailly], *Guide de Pologne*, Paris: Éditions des ‘Amis de la Pologne’, 1923, p. 27.

commercial and crowded, is worth visiting, despite its filth.<sup>36</sup> Her description thus recalls Kłos' image of squalor, while employing the same nickname for the neighbourhood that Kirkor had used over six decades earlier.

Very different is the attitude of Camille Drevet, who published a French-language account of her visit to Vilna and Kaunas in 1929 as an emissary of the pacifist and feminist Ligue internationale des femmes pour la paix et la liberté (International Women's League for Peace and Freedom).<sup>37</sup> Her focus is the dispute between Poland and Lithuania over control of the region, yet as a Frenchwoman she approaches this conflict as an outside observer rather than a nationalist partisan. Of the authors we have considered thus far, Drevet most resembles Szyk in her vision of a multicultural city and her interest in the Jewish minority. Drevet remarks to her hosts: 'I've been told that Vilna was Polish, Lithuanian, even Ruthenian. But it seems to me that the city is a bit Jewish.'<sup>38</sup> As a pacifist, she notes approvingly Jews' supposed lack of interest in claiming political power.<sup>39</sup>

Like other writers, Drevet visits the Jewish quarter, which she calls 'the most lively part of the city', and describes it as a mysterious, shadowy place.<sup>40</sup> Drevet, who travelled throughout Asia on behalf of the League, explicitly evokes the Orient: 'I had this impression of dense crowds, on the move, nervous, in Chinese cities. In the Vilna ghetto I think of an evening in Hong Kong [...].'<sup>41</sup> Yet her use of an orientalist motif does not carry the negative connotation it does in Kłos' narrative. Visiting the Great Synagogue at the start of the Sabbath, Drevet notes that religious rituals have given generations of Jews the strength to withstand persecution. She also writes sympathetically of the plight of Jewish youth, striving for a modern education but hampered by discrimination. This struggle, she concludes, made more of an impression on her than 'the sordid aspect of some corners of the ghetto'.<sup>42</sup>

36 Ibid., 33.

37 Drevet was also an anti-colonial activist and was close to communist circles. She travelled throughout Asia and Central and Southern Europe on behalf of the League and authored numerous books, including several on Gandhi. 'DREVET Camille, Eugénie (née BONNAT)' par Michel Dreyfus, version mise en ligne le 24 novembre 2010, dernière modification le 27 août 2019, <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article110693>.

38 Camille Drevet, *De Kovno à Vilna*, Cahors: A. Coueslant, 1929, p. 50.

39 Ibid., p. 51.

40 Ibid., p. 48.

41 Ibid., p. 51–52.

42 Ibid., p. 54.

In fact, Drevet is unique among the writers we have discussed in recognising the development of an innovative secular culture alongside the hallowed institutions of the Jewish quarter. She begins her tour of Jewish sights not in the environs of the Great Synagogue but at a ‘modern building in the new part of the city’,<sup>43</sup> the headquarters of the YIVO (acronym for Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut [Yiddish Scientific Institute]), the centre for Yiddish scholarship founded in 1925 and located in the recently developed neighbourhood of Pohulanka.<sup>44</sup> Drevet was not alone in making her way to the YIVO building, for the number of excursions eventually prompted the institute to set aside a special time for guests to tour the premises.<sup>45</sup> In his recommended itineraries, Szyk suggests beginning in the Jewish quarter and ending at the YIVO, as if reenacting the path from traditional to modern Vilna.<sup>46</sup> Drevet reverses Szyk’s trajectory by starting her tour in Pohulanka and then visiting the older neighbourhood at the suggestion of the YIVO staff, thus displacing the primacy of ‘the ghetto’ in her narrative.

At the YIVO headquarters, Drevet is struck by a map labelled in Yiddish to show the institute’s international network of branches and support groups: ‘On the wall a map of the world covered with coloured patches allows me to grasp at a single glance Jewish civilisation spread across the surface of the Earth.’<sup>47</sup> As she visits the YIVO library, she is ‘seized by the present, by the seething life of several million Jews spread over the world’s surface’.<sup>48</sup> Here, Drevet portrays Vilna’s Jews as a vibrant, diverse community linked to a global Diaspora that encompasses both the traditional and the modern, a vision that no doubt appealed to her internationalist sensibilities.

Similar in outlook was another guest from Western Europe, the German Jewish-born novelist Alfred Döblin.<sup>49</sup> Döblin’s 1924 account of his visit to the city includes the Jewish quarter, with its bustling shops and the Great Synagogue, but also secular schools teaching in Hebrew and Yiddish. Like Drevet, Döblin

43 Ibid., p. 48.

44 On the YIVO headquarters and the neighbourhood of Pohulanka, see Kuznitz, *YIVO*, p. 125–127, 131–134.

45 Ibid., 136–137.

46 Szyk, p. 6.

47 Drevet, p. 48.

48 Ibid., p. 49.

49 Döblin later converted to Catholicism. For discussions of Döblin’s writings on Vilna, see Briedis, p. 196–207, and Kvietkauskas, p. 211–213.

recognises the ‘modern, national, Western’ trends among Vilna’s Jews that are ‘driving them full force into the arms of civilisation’ and ‘developing [in them] a new sense of a free European nation’. Döblin summarises this duality as ‘Orient versus Occident’, ‘Gaon, Baal-Shem versus secular politics’.<sup>50</sup> In this formulation, it is a segment of the Jewish community itself that is part of European culture, while its more conservative members are marked as ‘orientals’ still beyond the civilised realm.

Nevertheless, these two authors from outside the region are the only ones under consideration to look beyond the familiar images of the Jewish quarter and acknowledge the new cultural and political trends that were transforming Vilna Jewry by the 1920s. Local writers by and large sought to buttress Polish hegemony by marginalising Jews and portraying them as a foreign presence, ignoring the ways in which they contributed to the city’s contemporary vibrancy. By contrast, the pacifist Drevet admired Vilna as a place where Jews flourished as a minority group in a diverse society, while Döblin, a modernist writer and acculturated Jew, was fascinated by the tension he observed between religion and secular culture. These visitors’ accounts, shaped by their own perspectives, embraced a more complex view that encompassed both Jewish tradition and modern Jewish life.

### Polish voices of the 1930s

As Polish–Jewish relations steadily worsened over the following decade, Polish-language guidebooks varied in their attitudes towards Vilna’s Jewish population, even as they evoked now-clichéd images. Two that appeared in the 1930s as part of the series *Cuda Polski* (Wonders of Poland) both explicitly use the orientalist discourse that we have seen in Kłos’ and Drevet’s works, and in similarly divergent ways. A 1934 volume by Jerzy Remer, an art historian and conservator,<sup>51</sup> includes a brief account of the Jewish quarter in a chapter entitled

50 Alfred Döblin, *Journey to Poland*, tr. Joachim Neugroschel, New York: Paragon Publishers, 1991, p. 109.

51 According to the son of the family that hid Remer and his wife during the Second World War, Remer was Jewish. However, this is not mentioned in other biographical sources, and it seems probable from the son’s account that only Remer’s wife was Jewish. See ‘A letter

‘Through Streets and Lanes’.<sup>52</sup> Like Kirkor, Remer weaves his description of the neighbourhood’s ‘arthritic lanes’ into his narrative of the city’s other picturesque byways. He presents this ‘black city’ as a mysterious enclave in the heart of Vilna ‘exhaling mildew and decay’. Furthermore, he again associates Jews with the orient when writing of ‘a closed world, where for hundreds of years there lived in an unchanging, archaic manner people of the East’.<sup>53</sup> Ignoring the modern movements described by Drevet and Döblin, Remer thus distances the Jews from the dominant Polish population in time as well as space by positing them solely as part of Vilna’s past.

Four years later, another volume was published in the series by Tadeusz Łopalewski, a writer with an interest in Lithuanian and Belorussian culture as well as a pioneer of Polish radio.<sup>54</sup> His travelogue *Między Niemnem a Dźwiną: Ziemia Wileńska i Nowogródzka* (Between the [Rivers] Niemen and the Dziwna: The Wilno and Nowogródek Districts) includes a chapter on Vilna. Here, the author writes that next to the ‘monumental’ city, ‘the Wilno of kings and magnates’, lie the ‘choked throats of the streets and passages of the ghetto’, which ‘present a sight of oriental Wilno, perhaps reminiscent of the alleys of Sarajevo or Constantinople, or the villages of southern Spain’.<sup>55</sup> Here, the connotation of the Orient, which stretches to Iberia (!), is rather positive, stressing the pleasing variety the Jewish quarter adds to the city’s landscape. Moreover, in Łopalewski’s account this variety extends to the population itself. He depicts the neighbourhood as a multiethnic commercial space that attracts ‘merchants from as far as the Black Sea, Muslims, Karaites and Jews’.<sup>56</sup> In a neat inversion of Gizbert’s reference to Julian Klaczko, the only Jewish figure mentioned

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from Mr Jerzy [sic] Raczkowski, who was hiding professor Jerzy Remer’, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, <http://sprawiedliwi.org.pl/en/stories-of-rescue/your-stories/letter-mr-jerzy-raczkowski-who-was-hiding-professor-jerzy-remer> [Last accessed 7 September 2020].

52 Jerzy Remer, *Wilno*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Polskie R. Wegnera, (1934?), p. 82–83. On this volume, see Weeks, p. 143–144. Remer’s book also features Jan Bułhak’s photographs.

53 Remer, p. 82–83.

54 Venclova, p. 256; Weeks, p. 141–142.

55 Tadeusz Łopalewski, *Między Niemnem a Dźwiną: Ziemia Wileńska i Nowogródzka*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Polskie R. Wegnera, [1938?], p. 138.

56 Ibid. Interestingly, Weeks writes that Łopalewski’s memoirs contain little mention of non-Polish groups, although he notes that this may be due to censorship at the time of their publication under communism.

specifically is the legendary Count Potocki, who converted to Judaism and was burned at the stake.<sup>57</sup> Here, near the end of the interwar period, the author offers an implicit affirmation of Vilna's historic diversity.

Finally, to see the range of attitudes towards Jews and other minorities in Polish texts of the 1930s, we will widen our lens to consider *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska* (Wilno and its District). This impressive large-format work, produced by the Regional Committee of the Wilno Province, consists of two volumes of essays published in 1930 and 1937 and an atlas with 12 maps published in 1931.<sup>58</sup> The approach in the first volume recalls Szyk's vision of Vilna as a truly multicultural city. The largest section, entitled 'Land and People', provides an ethnographic and historical survey of the region's population that emphasises its diversity. An article on religious communities discusses Old Believers, Muslims and Karaites, along with Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Protestants and Jews. The volume features the essay 'Wilno as a Centre of Jewish Cultural Life' by Mojżesz Heller, in addition to separate articles devoted to Lithuanians and Belorussians.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the contributors stress the harmonious relations among members of these diverse groups. An article on the region's early history describes Vilna's population of Lithuanians, Russians, Poles, Germans and Jews as a 'mosaic of nationalities', where we '*never meet* in the past ... *any national antagonisms, only religious ones*'.<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, this piece is by Waław Gizbert Studnicki, who expressed animosity towards Jews and Russians in his guidebook 20 years earlier. Furthermore, the only religious tensions here identified by Gizbert (himself a Calvinist) are among various Christian denominations.

At the same time, in his article Heller implicitly acknowledges the limits of the ruling Poles' support of minorities. Describing the range of traditional and modern Jewish educational institutions, for example, he notes the poor financial situation of the secular Yiddish schools run by TSYSHO (Tsentrale Yidishe Shul Organizatsye [Central Yiddish School Organisation]). As a history teacher in these schools himself, Heller was surely personally aware of their precarious

57 Ibid., p. 142.

58 *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska*, 2 Vol. + atlas, Wilno: Wydawnictwo Wojewódzkiego Komitetu Regionalnego, 1930–1937.

59 Mojżesz Heller, 'Wilno jako ośrodek żydowskiego życia kulturalnego', in: Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 262–271.

60 Waław Gizbert-Studnicki, 'Wilno w rządzie stolic Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej', in: Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 147. Italics in the original.

budgets.<sup>61</sup> He writes that only two of the 15 TSYSHO primary schools in the region had received small subsidies from the state during the past year.<sup>62</sup> The clear implication is that the Polish government was failing to fulfil the terms of the Minorities Treaties it had signed at the conclusion of the First World War, which obligated it to provide funding to the schools of its national minorities. Thus, the 1930 volume includes Jews within its vision of a multi-cultural Vilna, while also acknowledging tensions over their place in the Second Polish Republic.

The atlas published the following year takes a very different approach, for like Mościcki's 1922 text, it simply omits the Jewish presence. This publication does recognise the multiethnic character of the region, for it documents not only Polish but also Lithuanian and Old Believer communities. The introduction states that the statistics on which its maps are based 'cannot adequately illustrate ethnic relations' in the area, and provides a detailed discussion of the problem of identifying the Belorussian population. It then notes the editors' decision to exclude from the category of 'Poles' those of the Jewish faith claiming to be Polish, since their claim may be motivated by 'opportunism'. It further justifies their decision to ignore Jews as a separate category with this astounding (and clearly false) assertion: 'We did not include the Jewish population in the maps because it only inhabits towns [*miasteczka*, often used to denote shtetls] and in no case influences the general ethnic character of the area.'<sup>63</sup> Thus, Jews are denied both inclusion in the Polish majority and recognition as a distinct minority, effectively rendering them invisible.

The final volume, published in 1937, stakes out a middle ground between the extremes of embrace or erasure of Jews and other minorities. A survey of educational institutions by Adolf Hirschberg, himself the director of a Jewish high school in Vilna,<sup>64</sup> documents the full range of students' religious backgrounds and institutions' languages of instruction, including Yiddish and Hebrew. Here we learn, for example, that in the 1929–1930 school year, 32 per

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61 'Heler, d'r moyshes,' in: *Lerer-yizker-bukh*, ed. K.S. Kazdan, New York: Marstin Press, 1952–1954, p. 134–137.

62 Heller, p. 264.

63 Janusz Ostrowski, in: *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska*, atlas t., 1931, n.p.

64 On Hirschberg, see John Connelly, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014, p. 365, note 8.

cent of secondary school students in the Vilna district and 41.6 per cent in the Nowogródek district were Jewish.<sup>65</sup> Yet elsewhere in the volume, the emphasis is clearly on the Polish majority. Sections on literature, music and theatre focus exclusively on Polish culture. The article on Vilna's libraries mentions the YIVO and the Strashun Library in the one sentence devoted to 'minority libraries',<sup>66</sup> while that on publishing mentions briefly Jewish printers, including the famous Romm press.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, another author gives statistics on Polish, Latin, Cyrillic-alphabet, Lithuanian and Latvian printing in the city, but omits any equivalent figures for Hebrew-alphabet publications.<sup>68</sup>

By the time this publication appeared, it must have seemed something of an anachronism in a period of rising nationalism and antisemitism in Poland, yet the publishers clearly devoted considerable resources to completing the three-volume work. Two of the scholars overseeing the project, Bronisław Ryzdewski and Władysław Zawadzki, served in the Polish national government as supporters of Józef Piłsudski.<sup>69</sup> The third, Stanisław Kościałkowski, was not active in political life but took an interest in Jewish history and reportedly knew Hebrew and Yiddish.<sup>70</sup> Thus, we may see this collection as an expression of the more liberal approach to Polish history and culture associated with the figure of Piłsudski, one that faded as the interwar period wore on. Yet despite the increasingly xenophobic climate of the 1930s, in works such as *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska* and Łopalewski's travelogue, we still see echoes of Szyk's multicultural vision of Vilna.

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65 Adolf Hirschberg, 'Zarys historyczno-statystyczny szkolnictwa na ziemiach północno-wschodnich (1913–1929)', in: *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska*, Vol. 2, p. 65.

66 Adam Łysakowski, 'Biblioteki w Wilnie,' in: *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 124.

67 Ludwik Abramowicz, 'Drukarstwo wileńskie,' in: *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 114.

68 Stanisław Cywiński, 'Literatura w Wilnie i Wilno w literaturze', in: *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 104.

69 Zawadzki was a member of the Polska Partia Socjalistyczna (Polish Socialist Party), and later a minister without portfolio (1932) and minister of finance (1932–1935). Stanisław Łoza, ed., *Czy Wiesz Kto To Jest?*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Głównej Księgarni Wojskowej, 1938, p. 839. Ryzdewski was elected to the Senate in 1930 as part of the Bezpartyjny Blok Współpracy z Rządem (Non-Party Bloc for Cooperation with the Government). Władysław Konopczyński et al., eds., *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, Kraków: Nakł. Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1935.

70 *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*. Kościałkowski was also active in the Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk (Society of Friends of Science) in Vilna, and a founder of the journal *Ateneum Wileńskie*.

## Conclusions

From the mid-19th century through the end of the interwar period, a variety of texts about Vilna were published to guide and inform both visitors and armchair travellers. Such works often portray the city and its multifaceted population in ways that suited their authors' own needs or preconceptions, thus shedding light on competing visions of the larger society and the place of Jews within it. For Szyk, his *Toyznt yor vilne* was an opportunity both to highlight the Jewish community and to depict his home town in all its diversity; but this inclusive approach was rarely duplicated by non-Jewish writers. The exceptions include the earliest work we have considered, which was composed in a period of relative amity between Poles and Jews. Writing in the 1850s, Kirkor depicts the already-decrepit Jewish quarter with compassion for its impoverished residents. Yet Łopalewski and many of the contributors to *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska* demonstrate that such attitudes persisted even among the heightened tensions of the 1930s.

Some authors, such as Mościcki and the editors of the 1931 atlas, simply omit any mention of Jews and thereby erase their presence. If such a move may be seen as implicitly political, other authors were more explicit in their biases. Writing in the last years of the Tsarist Empire, Gizber's discussion is coloured by his animosity towards Vilna's Russian rulers. Writing in the wake of the First World War and the struggle for control of the city, Kłos is intent on establishing Vilna as an integral part of the Second Polish Republic. If many Polish writers' treatment of the local Jewish community reflected the forces at work among the ethnicities and nationalities competing for power in this contested region, visitors likewise brought their own perspectives. For her part, the French pacifist Drevet seems relieved to find in the Jews a group not vying for political dominance.

Of Vilna's Jewish sights, writers devoted by far the most attention to the so-called 'ghetto', balancing their attraction to its quaint byways and bustling shops with their aversion to its poverty and filth. Nearly all portrayed the neighbourhood as a notable element within the urban landscape, yet by the 1920s, Kirkor's sympathetic description of a mysterious labyrinth had given way to expressions of increasing distaste. Some observers saw the Jewish quarter as an exotic locale fundamentally at odds with Vilna's preferred identity as a modern European city, just as they saw Jews as an alien element in the Polish

population. Many employed the language of orientalism, yet this imagery could evoke a variety of associations: for Kłos and Remer, it signified Jews' foreignness; while for Drevet and Łopalewski, it represented a charming novelty.

Few authors ventured beyond the confines of this legendary neighbourhood. Those who did, the West European visitors Drevet and Döblin as well as some contributors to *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska*, discovered a world of new, largely secular Jewish cultural and political movements. Their portraits of a vibrant and varied community belie other descriptions of a traditional, ossified Jewry cut off from the surrounding society. Yet such images retained their resonance for both Jews and non-Jews, despite, or perhaps because of, the changes wrought internally by modernisation, and externally by increasing antisemitism.<sup>71</sup> Whatever lens these writers employed, and whatever disparate conclusions they reached, Vilna Jewry remained a subject of fascination for visitors and native sons alike.

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## **Pasivaikščiojimai po Vilną: miestas ir jo žydai vadovuose po miestą ir kelionių aprašymuose, 1856–1939**

### *Santrauka*

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Nuo XIX a. vidurio iki XX a. tarpukario pabaigos buvo išleista įvairių leidinių apie Vilnių, skirtų tiek turistams, tiek iš namų kojos nekeliantiems kelionių mėgėjams. Šiame straipsnyje aptariamus kelionių vadovus lenkų, prancūzų ir vokiečių kalbomis parašė ir vilniečiai, ir miesto svečiai, norėję pasidalyti išpūdžiais apie miestą, jo įžymybes ir gyventojus. 1939 m. išėjęs visa apimantis Zalmeno Šyko vadovas *Toynt yor Vilne* („Tūkstantis Vilniaus metų“) išaukštino žydų tautinei mažumai reikšmingas miesto vietas, drauge parodydamas ir jo įvairovę, kuri liberalių pažiūrų žmonėms reiškė geriausią Vilnos paveldo dalį. Straipsnyje aptariami ir kiti panašaus pobūdžio kelionių

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71 On this point, see Kuznitz, 'Jewish Street', p. 82–87.

vadovai: nuo paties ankstyviausio, 1856 m. išleisto Adamo H. Kirkoro, iki chronologiškai Šyko leidiniui artimiausio Tadeuszo Łopalewskiego 1938 m. kelionių gido ir daugelio autorių sudaryto leidinio *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska* (1930–1937).

Pažymėtina, kad kai kurie autoriai, pavyzdžiui, Henrykas Mościckis savo vadove (1922) ir atlaso *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska* (1931) tome, Vilniuje gyvenusių žydų apskritai neminėjo. Kiti, kaip antai Władysławas Zahorskis (1910) ir Rosa Bailly (1923), apie žydus tik užsiminė. Žinoma, toks požiūris galėjo būti nulemtas politinių aplinkybių, kai faktas, kad Vilniuje gyvuoja žydų bendruomenė, tiesiog ignoruotas. Buvo ir kur kas atviriau savo pažiūras reiškiančių autorių. Paskutiniaus Rusijos carinės imperijos valdymo metais rašytame ir 1910 m. išleistame Wacławo Gizberto miesto vadove aiškiai matyti autoriaus priešiškus Vilnių valdžiusiems rusams. O štai po Pirmojo pasaulinio karo išėjusiam vadove (1923) ryškus jo autoriaus Juliuszo Kłoso noras pavaizduoti Vilnių kaip neatsiejamą Antrosios Lenkijos Respublikos dalį. Šių rašytojų požiūris į Vilniaus žydų bendruomenę atspindėjo jų ištikimybę savajai lenkų tautai. 1929 m. Vilnių aplankiusi prancūzų pacifistė ir feministė Camille Drevet, regis, taip pat pajuto palengvėjimą, kad žydų bendruomenė čia nesiekia politinio vyravimo.

Žydiškojo Vilniaus lankytinas vietas aprašantys autoriai daugiausia dėmesio skyrė vadinamajam getui – tradiciniam žydų gyvenimo centrai. Jie žavėjosi jo mielais užkaboriais ir gyva prekyba, bet bjaurėjosi skurdū ir nešvara. Beveik visi autoriai žydų kvartalą vaizdavo kaip išskirtinę miesto kraštovaizdžio dalį, tačiau, pradėdant XX a. trečiuoju dešimtmečiu, Kirkorui būdingą šios miesto dalies palankų aprašymą keitė vis labiau reiškiamas pasibjaurėjimas. Žydų kvartalas vaizduotas kaip egzotiška vieta, visiškai nederanti su Vilniaus, kaip šiuolaikinio Europos miesto, tapatybe, panašiai, kaip ir žydai laikyti svetimais lenkų didžiumos gyvenamame mieste. Daugelis rašiusiųjų apie Vilniaus žydų kvartalą rėmėsi orientalizmo prieiga, tačiau rinkosi skirtingus tokio sugretinimo aspektus. 1934 m. rašiusiems Kłosui ir Jerzy Remerui tai reiškė žydų, kaip iš Rytų kilusios tautos, svetimumą, o Drevet ir Łopalewskuii getas atrodė kaip žavi įdomybė. Šio legendinio kvartalo ribas peržengti drįsę autoriai – keliautojai po Vakarų Europą Camille Drevet ir Alfredas Döblinas (1924), taip pat *Wilno i Ziemia Wileńska* bendradarbiai, ten atrado naują, daugiausia žydų pasaulietinių kultūrinių ir politinių judėjimų pasaulį. Tokie skirtingi vadovuose po miestą ir kelionių aprašymuose pateikiami pasakojimai nušvietė tuo metu gyvavusias įvairias visuomenės vizijas ir žydų vietą toje visuomenėje.

*Raktažodžiai:* Vilna, vadovai po miestą, kelionių aprašymai, žydų kvartalas, YIVO, orientalizmas.