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Moyshe Kulbak's and Zalman Shneour's Vilnius: Poetic Reality versus Glorious Construct

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Annotation: During the interwar period, many attempts were made to perceive and interpret the legacy of Jewish Vilnius, both in the city itself and abroad. Many of the images of the city created in that period betray nostalgic and half-mythological features, even while they present a living and breathing Jewish environment. This essay is a comparative case study of two literary texts that might provide some answers to these questions. One is the Hebrew poem *Vilna* by Zalman Shneour (1919), and the other is the Yiddish poem 'Vilne' by Moyshe Kulbak (1926). Each poet, the paper argues, set opposing goals for himself: for Shneour, it was creating an ode to a legendary centre of Jewish learning and spirituality; while Kulbak attempted to capture the pulse of the actual city that he lived in. Accordingly, Shneour essentially reiterated every traditional rhetorical trope of Jewish Vilnius, without creating a new poetic vision of it; whereas Kulbak used the potential of modernised Yiddish and Expressionist poetics to paint a vibrant and exciting portrait of the city. However, after the trauma of the physical loss of Jewish Vilnius during the Second World War, it was Shneour's stylistic approach and depiction of the city that would prevail.

Keywords: Moyshe Kulbak, Zalman Shneour, image of Vilnius.

The beginning of Jewish artistic reflections on Vilnius

After the First World War, the Jewish intelligentsia and literati of Vilnius undertook to assess and document the traumatic experience of the war and its implications for the life of the city and its Jews. To this end, many attempts were made during the interwar period, both in the city itself and abroad, to interpret the legacy of Jewish Vilnius. Many, if not most, literary and journalistic, as well as photojournalistic, images of the city created in that period bear clear nostalgic

and half-mythological features, while presenting the living and breathing Jewish environment, as if the latter was *Vilna shel mata* (material Vilnius), and the former *Vilna shel mala* (celestial Vilnius). By the former, I mean, of course, the master trope of Vilna as ‘the Jerusalem of Lithuania’.

Jewish literati, whether consciously or not, differentiated between the appearance of the city and its Jewish image. When describing its appearance, they chose more or less the same landscape and urban landmarks as their non-Jewish counterparts: gardens, hills, monasteries, the castle tower; and even the inevitable ‘maze of narrow streets’ of the old city were not always identified as the streets of the Jewish quarter. But when speaking about the image of Vilnius, most of them shifted into the ideology of ‘Jerusalem of Lithuania’, and the same cityscape began to project a different message. A prime example of this dichotomy can be found in the 1925 picture book and anthology ‘Jewish Vilnius in Word and Image’. In his foreword to this lavish volume, ‘Our Contemporary Live Vilnius’, Moshe Shalit opens with the trope of ‘Jerusalem of Lithuania’, setting up the paradox of looking at the living ‘contemporary’ Vilnius through the lens of legend.¹ Many poetic texts included in this volume present a similar perspective, like the poem ‘Vilne’ by Sore Reyzen:

Your narrow and bent streets
 With their dangerously unsafe pavements
 And their small old houses
 Tell the tales of the past:

Of the Jewish ghetto
 And of what we have suffered
 During the long and grievous exile ...²

Two poets, two cities of Vilnius

Nowhere can the clash between image and reality be seen more clearly than in the two central ‘Vilna texts’ of the interwar period. One is the Hebrew poem

1 Moritz Grossman, ed., *Yidische Vilne in vort un bild*, Vilnius: Hirsh Mats publishing, p. 5.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 22. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

Vilna by Zalman Shneour (1919), and the other the Yiddish poem 'Vilne' by Moyshe Kulbak (1926).³ I will examine how both poets deal with the image of Vilnius as a projection of Jerusalem, and offer some preliminary conclusions about the literary representation of Vilnius in Jewish literature of the interwar period.

Both Shneour and Kulbak lived in Vilnius for a period of time, although Shneour's sojourn was very short, and he wrote his poem after he had already left the city. First published in the New York Hebrew almanac *Miklat* (Sanctuary) in 1919,⁴ it was republished in 1923 in a new form that would play a decisive role in defining the discourse of 'the Jerusalem of Lithuania'. I mean Shneour's cooperation with the famous artist Hermann Struck in publishing the poem as a separate book with Struck's illustrations.⁵ Struck, who also spent only a few years in Vilnius during the First World War (in his capacity as an officer in the German army's Oberbefehlshaber Ost division⁶), was affected by the city and its Jewish life in a similar way as Shneour was, and therefore became an ideal partner for him. In fact, he did not even need to create new illustrations: his lithographic works from 1915 and 1916 fitted seamlessly into the book, sometimes illustrating Shneour's lines quite literally.⁷ This is because, in my

3 First publication: *Di tsukunft*, 31, 1926.

4 No 1. With a note of creation: Berlin, 1917.

5 In the *Miklat* publication, only one of Struck's illustrations was used. For more on the 1923 edition of *Vilna*, see my article: 'Iliustruota "Lietuvos Jeruzalės" mitų knyga: apie Zalmano Šneuro ir Hermano Štruko knygą *Vilna* (Berlin, 1923)', in: Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, ed., *Atrasti Vilnių: skiriama Vlado Drėmos 100-mečiui*, Vilnius: Vilniaus Dailės akademijos leidykla, 2010.

6 He was also appointed to be a liaison officer with the Jewish community, and was an official artist for the military newspaper *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, where he published numerous illustrations inspired by Jewish life in Lithuania. His works of that kind also appeared in the only general newspapers allowed by the military censorship: *Kowner Zeitung* and *Wilner Zeitung*, and in his and Herbert Eulenberg's book *Skizzen aus Litauen, Weissrussland und Kurland*, Berlin: G. Stilke, 1916. The most famous result of his artistic study of East European and Lithuanian Jewry is his collaboration with the writer and Struck's army comrade Arnold Zweig for their celebrated book *Das ostjüdische Antlitz*, Berlin: Welt-Farlag, 1920, 1922, 1929.

7 Cf.: 'Unlike the assimilated German-Jewish soldiers such as Arnold Zweig and Hermann Struck whose military service took them to Lithuania, Shneour was not a stranger to eastern European Jewry. Given his deep roots in the literary national revival of eastern European Jewry, he cannot easily be included in [...] the romantic cult of the *Ostjuden*. Yet although he was a Jewish-Russian immigrant in Berlin, and therefore an eastern European Jew himself, Shneour was nevertheless influenced by German-Jewish neo-romantic descriptions of eastern European Jewry.' Lilach Nethanel, 'Poetics of Distance: Zalman Shneour in Berlin during the First World War and its Aftermath', in: *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 60, 2015, p. 8.

opinion, neither Shneour nor Struck aimed to create a picture of a living city; rather, they both felt compelled to work with the very concept of ‘the Jerusalem of Lithuania’, with all its implications of piety and preoccupation with the life of the spirit. Even the format of the publication is evocative: the typeface imitates the manuscript writing of a Torah scroll, and the numbering of the pages mimics a printed edition of the Hebrew Bible, which together convey a message of a city worthy of reverence. From its opening lines, Shneour’s poem is an ode, not to Jewish Vilnius as such, but to its already-established image:

Vilna, my great grandmother, metropolis of the Jewish nation,
 Jerusalem of exile, consolation of the ancient folk in their Northern abode!
 Your unruly bonnet, reminiscent of the roof of an old synagogue,
 In the eyes of your grandchildren rises higher than the gilded cupolas of temples.
 Often would you dry their tears with your old apron,
 Embroidered in lions and crowns, in the manner of a Torah mantle,
 Sweeten their sorrows by your famous Pesach and Purim delicacies,
 And entertain them by the beautiful eloquence of your writers.
 Even your water carriers draw from the source of Torah giants ...⁸

In the first 30 lines of the poem, a whole range of signs and names of traditional Vilnius appears: the Vilna Gaon; the righteous proselyte, Ger-Tsedek; the young cantor called Vilner Balebesl; the wit Motke Chabad; the Romm publishing house; the Strashun Library; and much more. There is also a symbol of piety, Jewish boys on their way to religious school:

I observe Jewish youth zealously hurrying
 Through the labyrinthine little streets to their *heders*.
 So tender are their faces, so sad their eyes.
 In infamous poverty their fine skin with blue veins
 Shows them for what they are:
 Judean princes brought among foreign tribes.
 They are pale, thin and delicate, like young palms
 That were uprooted and brought to the swamps of that country ...⁹

8 Zalman Shneour, *Vilna*, Berlin: Hasefer, 1923, p. 6.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Shneour seems thoroughly at home in the long tradition of glorifying Jewish Vilnius that presented him with ready-made material to render in poetic form. Although rightfully considered a modernist Hebrew-Yiddish writer, in depicting Vilnius, Shneour draws linguistically from the archaic *melitsa* (eloquence), the dominant stylistic tool of Haskalah literature.¹⁰

Kulbak's sources, on the other hand, are Jewish classical texts. Unlike Shneour, he never calls Vilnius 'Jerusalem' in his poem; but this comparison is clear and distinctive to the reader, due to the poetic and linguistic arsenal chosen.

The poem is an in-depth artistic exploration and poetic discovery of Vilnius that breaks the safe stereotypes of its depictions. What is more, Kulbak does not praise either the glorious past or the romantic beauty of the city. Without any preamble, he takes us directly into a strange, unusual, grey city night, that corresponds directly with night in another city:

Someone in a *tales* is walking over your rooftops,¹¹
 Only he is stirring in the city by night.
 He listens. Old grey veins quicken – sound
 Through courtyard and synagogue like a hoarse, dusty heart.¹²

One of Kulbak's strengths is his way of using the Hebraisms of biblical provenance in a more intense and concentrated way than they are usually used in Yiddish, thus creating an intertext, and not just a Yiddish text with a Hebrew linguistic component:

You are the Book of Psalms written in clay and iron.¹³
 Every stone is a prayer, and every wall a sacred melody.

10 The trope of spiritualised poverty also originated in the literature of Vilnius Haskalah. See, for example, Shmuel Verses, 'Di shtot Vilne in shpigl fun der hebreisher haskole-literatur', YIVO Bleter/Naye series, II, New York, 1994.

11 Cf.: 'I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; They shall never hold their peace day or night' (Is 62, 6). I am indebted to David Roskies for drawing my attention to this parallel, as well as for his other valuable notes and advice.

12 Translation by Nathan Halpern. Quoted from: Moyshe Kulbak, 'Vilne', Vilnius: Vaga, 1997, p. 17.

13 The translation is mine, quoted from the Yiddish original of the same edition. p. 9.

When the moonlight leaks into your cabbalistic lanes,
 It shines palely on your naked and repellent cold beauty.
 ...
 Each stone is a Torah scroll, and each wall a parchment.¹⁴

This is the city where one walks in a *tales* (prayer shawl). There is no need to preach about its glory and its spiritual splendour: by the first line alone, Kulbak shows that the whole city space is sacred. This city need not be presented as physically picturesque and attractive, quite the opposite (naked and repellent cold beauty), because its material forms, stone and iron, walls and streets, are only vessels for inner meaning. Even the ubiquitous trope of narrow and meandering streets is rejected in favour of *geslekh fun kabole*, cabbalistic lanes, a trope which is not only strikingly visual, but also alludes, without naming him, to a great Vilna cabbalist who lived on one of these streets, the Vilna Gaon.

The beginnings of both poems signify their poetic world: Shneour's narrative is lengthy and ornamental, Kulbak's is laconic and Expressionist (compare the sheer length of the poems: the 160 lines of Kulbak's to the 310 of Shneour's). What Shneour declares, Kulbak articulates by energetic and complex images tightly packed by associations from deep layers of textual tradition. Shneour writes in Hebrew, but it is Kulbak's Yiddish poem that evokes the full range of classical Hebrew textual culture. Additionally, Kulbak writes in the present tense, and Shneour in the past tense. Of course, his whole poem is a memory of the city written from a reverential distance in time and space, but even so, due to his chosen mode of poetic narration, all the glory that he depicts seems to be the legacy of ancient times and deeds, whereas Kulbak boldly states: 'I am the city!'¹⁵ If Shneour associates himself with Vilnius as with 'a great grandmother', Kulbak fully identifies with it.

Jerusalem comes to the fore in Kulbak's poem without him once using the idiom of 'the Jerusalem of Lithuania'.¹⁶ His leitmotif *Du bist a tilim* (You are the

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 11.

16 A comparison could be made to the first historiographic work on Jewish Vilnius published in 1860 by Samuel Joseph Finn, whose title *Kiriya neimana* (The Faithful City, one of the epithets of Jerusalem) makes a strong, though subtle, statement of similarity between Vilnius and Jerusalem.

Book of Psalms) refers, of course, to the legendary author of the Psalms, King David, and thus brings to mind David's city, Jerusalem. Kulbak rejects much of the late, European-inspired imagery prevalent in depicting Vilnius, and goes directly to the general foundations of Jewish culture: the Hebrew Bible (each stone is a Torah scroll), the Psalms, and the cabbalistic book *Raziel ha-malakh* (Angel Raziel).

But not only these images and associations prove that Kulbak's poem is informed by Jewish classical texts. Let us again consider the line *A seyfer iz ayeder shteyn, a parmet – yede vant* (Every stone is a Torah scroll, every wall a parchment). In fact, the meaning of both parts of the line is the same, since the Torah scrolls are written on parchment, and only the wording differs. It is a brilliant Yiddish use of biblical parallelism so characteristic of some of the Prophets, the Book of Proverbs, Jeremiah's Lament and, most specifically, the Psalms. In that way, the line not only expresses the sacral nature of the city by its content and built-in associations, but it supports by its very construction the image of Vilnius as the Book of Psalms that also appears explicitly in the poem (You are the Book of Psalms).

Kulbak's method of inscribing the biblical landscape into the warp and woof of Vilnius may hark back to Mikha Joseph Lebensohn (1828–1852), a Vilna Hebrew poet who died very young. As a prominent exponent of the Haskalah, Lebensohn employed both the imagery and the rhetoric of the Bible and its use of parallelism. Thus, in his poem 'Shlomo' (King Solomon) from his collection 'Songs of the Daughter of Zion', Lebensohn depicts the land of Judea: 'Every stone is a Torah scroll, every rock a tablet [of the Decalogue].'¹⁷ If Lebensohn's poem did indeed serve Kulbak as an intertext, then the Yiddish poet appropriated Lebensohn's method of inscribing the landscape of the Land of Israel into the urban cityscape of Vilnius in a very subversive manner, for by replacing Judea with Vilnius, the latter became a Jewish space *par excellence*, and an heir to the sanctity of the Land of Israel.

Shneour's poem is, obviously, full of terms and concepts from Jewish tradition, but I would argue that they are used in a purely decorative way. As an example, I will quote his depiction of night:

17 Mikha Joseph Lebensohn, *Shire bat tsion*, Vilnius: Yosef Reuven Romm, 1851, p. 3.

The darkness has already donned her prayer shawl [*talit*], adorned by stars,
And it brushes by golden tassels [*tsitsit*] on buildings and trees and faces of guards
and Jews.

A full moon shines above the bell-tower,

Like a huge gilded dot [*cholan*] above the heaven-word looking for the letter 'vav'.¹⁸

All elements of that imagery are ostentatiously Jewish, but they are used in a way that does not make the city Jewish; moreover, they could have been applied by a Jewish poet to a night in any city. That is because Shneour's sources, as I have already mentioned, are not classical texts themselves, but their transmission and 'sieving' through the literature of Haskalah that attempted to create a new literature in the 'biblical language', and therefore developed a specific, very decorative and rather heavy style imitating the Bible. However, what was good for the mid-19th century feels pompous and obsolete in the 20th. The stylistic contrast of both poems can be illustrated by comparing the rendering of the same image, that of a water carrier.

Shneour, we recall, wrote: 'Even your water carriers draw from the source of Torah giants ...'¹⁹

In Kulbak, we read:

And on the old synagogue a frozen water carrier,
Small beard tilted, stands counting the stars.²⁰

In Shneour's text, the water carriers are emblematic: such is the piety of the city that even the water carriers are virtually Torah scholars. Kulbak's water carrier lacks decorum, the image is purposely lowered, almost in a Chagallian manner, but that is precisely what makes this figure alive and poetically convincing.

Another comparative example shows the poets' way of building a metaphor from Jewish cultural material. Shneour, on the aforementioned *heder* boys ('Judean princes'):

18 Schneour, *Vilna*, p. 20.

19 Ibid, p. 6.

20 N. Halpern's translation. Kulbak, 'Vilne', p. 17.

Their souls seek a gleam of Galilean sun
hidden [*nignaz*] among the black letters [of the texts they learn in *heder*].²¹

This hidden sun is evidently *or ha-ganuz* (hidden light), a cabbalistic concept that entered the mainstream of Jewish literacy, so that any reader of Shneour's, at least in his time, would easily catch the metaphor. But the concept itself is not developed along the associative lines of that idea paramount for the Jewish tradition: the primordial light which scattered and was hidden when its vessels broke, and its escaped sparks had to be gathered ray by ray to bring about *tikun olam* (restoring the world). In Shneour's text, the metaphor of the hidden light functions merely as a stylistic embellishment.

The same 'hidden light' is also 'hidden' in Kulbak's poem, only in a much more sophisticated and meaningful way:

A tallow candle flutters, dripping,
Where a cabbalist sits, tangled into his garret,
Like a spider, drawing the grey thread of life.
'Is there anyone in this cold emptiness?'
...
Raziel is standing before him; he gleams in the darkness.
The wings an old, faded parchment.
The eyes – pits filled with sand and with cobweb.
'There is no one. Only sorrow is left.'
The candle drips. Stupefied, the weak man listens.
He suckles the darkness out of the angel's sockets.²²

The cabbalist, with his small light in a grey, dark, cold and pitiless world that even encompasses the angel Raziel, is a picture of the domination of *kliipot*, and his candle is that hidden light that is the only hope for *tikun olam*, although it is as weak as the man himself, and hardly capable of overcoming the darkness.

In this case, Kulbak's metaphor is developed within a much longer description than Shneour's, because he brings up the concept of hidden light

21 Shneour, *Vilna*, p. 14.

22 N. Halpern's translation. Kulbak, 'Vilne', p. 17.

not for its exotic tenor, to which end Shneour quite obviously uses it, but for demonstrating a deep existential struggle, which is Jewish in its very essence.

I would argue that the goals of the two poets were the exact opposite: for Shneour, it was to underscore the legend of Vilnius as a centre of Jewish learning and spirituality; and for Kulbak, to capture the pulse of the real city he lived in. Accordingly, Shneour wrote in a classic, almost archaic manner, and essentially reiterated every traditional rhetorical trope of Jewish Vilnius, without creating a new poetic vision of it; whereas Kulbak used the potential of modernised Yiddish and of Expressionist poetics to create an exciting, although not at all prettified, portrait of the city.

Conclusions

One might think that Shneour's aesthetic, very simply, preceded Kulbak's, and the latter just represents a later and more modern generation, hence the differences in depicting Vilnius. However, we know that the Jewish Vilnius discourse that prevailed was more Schneour's than Kulbak's, and the main reason for this was post-traumatic nostalgia. Post-Holocaust perceptions of Vilnius bear a strong resemblance to the idealised cityscape of Shneour. Probably the most striking examples are survivors who before the Second World War did not partake of glorification of Vilnius, but changed their stance after the war. One example of such a nostalgic interpolation is the historian Israel Klausner, who did not use the idiom of 'the Jerusalem of Lithuania' in his prewar monograph, which was called simply 'A History of the Vilnius Jewish community', and presented an objective historical narrative; but in his postwar article 'The Mystery of Jewish Lithuania'²³ he let himself be transported into the territory of mythology, so it is no wonder that the supplemented edition of his 1938 work was published in Israel under the title 'Vilnius, the Jerusalem of Lithuania'.²⁴ And even Avrom Karpinovich, whose characters are very far from the scholarly and intellectual elite of Vilnius, but rather represent the criminal underground, in his last

23 Yisrael Kloyzner, 'Ha-hida Lita', in: David Liptz, ed. *Yahadut Lita*, I-III, Tel-Aviv: Am Ha-sefer 1959–1967, Vol. I.

24 Yisrael Kloyzner, *Vilna Yerushalayim de-Lita*, I-II, Kibuts Lohame ha-getaot, 1988.

published text 'My Native City Vilnius',²⁵ wrote a preamble about the Talmudic prodigies of 'the Jerusalem of Lithuania'.²⁶

In the words of David Roskies, 'because of the Holocaust, every teller of local traditions became a teller of exotic places.'²⁷ This 'exotic location' is, in fact, time, the mythologised past inhabited by beloved ghosts. Shneour and Kulbak could choose how to render Jewish Vilnius which continued to exist; the postwar generations of literati felt that they did not have that choice.

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Moišės Kulbako ir Zalmano Šneuro Vilnius: poetinė realybė prieš pakylėtą konstruktą

Santrauka

Straipsnis skirtas Vilniaus įvaizdžiui, sukurtam dviejų žydų poetų – Moišės Kulbako ir Zalmano Šneuro. Autorė pristato jidiš kalba parašytą Kulbako poemą *Vilne* (1926) ir hebrajišką Šneuro poemą *Vilna* (1919) kaip dviejų atvejų studiją, bandydama jose rasti inovatyvaus poetiško žydų Vilniaus vaizdavimo. Tačiau kūrinų poetikos nagrinėjimas bei tekstų siunčiamų

25 Avromas Karpinovičius, 'Mano gimtasis miestas Vilnius', in: Larisa Lempertienė, ed., *Tarp-tautinės mokslinės konferencijos „Vilniaus žydų intelektualinis gyvenimas iki Antrojo pasaulinio karo“ medžiaga. Vilnius, 2003 m. rugsėjo 16–17 d./Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference „Jewish Intellectual Life in Pre-War Vilna“. September, 16–17, 2003, Vilnius, Vilnius: Mokslo aidai, 2004.*

26 Avraham Noverstern notes in his excellent analysis of Kulbak's poem that in post-Second World War Yiddish literature, there is no example of such a complicated attitude to Jewish Vilnius like Kulbak's, since any trace of criticism towards the Jewish experience almost vanished in the aftermath of the Holocaust. See Avraham Noverstern, 'Shir halel, shir kina: dimuya shel Vilna beyn shtey milhamot ha-olam', in: David Assaf et al., eds., *Mi-Vilna li-Yerushalayim. Mehkarim be-toldoteyhem uve-tarbutam shel yehude Mizrah Eropā mugashim le-profesor Shmuel Verses*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002, p. 495.

27 David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 310.

žinučių svarstymas leidžia konstatuoti, kad iš tikrųjų nauja miesto matymo perspektyva atsiveria Kulbako tekste, tuo tarpu Šneuro poema pasitelkia ankstesnėje žydų literatūroje susiformavusios žydų Vilniaus apdainavimo tradicijos priemonių arsenalą. Abu poetai pristato Vilnių kaip „Jeruzalę“, bet Kulbako poemoje šis vaizdinys formuojasi per poetines sąsajas su klasikiniiais žydų tekstais ir jų palaikytas komplikuotas metaforas, o Šneuras savo poetinę viziją grindžia „Šiaurės Jeruzalės“ kliše. Autorė teigia, kad ne tik chronologinis atstumas lėmė Kulbako modernumą ir naujumą: juk dar vėliau, po Holokausto, sukurti Vilniaus vaizdiniai estetiškai kur kas artimesni Šneuro, o ne Kulbako poetinei išraiškai. To priežastį autorė mato potrauminėje patirtyje, Šneuro atveju susijusioje su Pirmuoju pasauliniu karu, o pohlolokaustinėje literatūroje – su Antruoju. Kulbako poema, sukurta tarpukario žydų literatūros klestėjimo metu, nepekrautas nostalgija, todėl joje ne kuriamas idealizuotas, pusiau mitologinis miesto vaizdas, bet mėginama poetiškai interpretuoti gyvą ir tikrą žydiškąjį Vilnių.

Raktažodžiai: Moyshe Kulbak, Zalman Shneour, Vilniaus vaizdinys.
