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Vilne, Vilne undzer Meka: A City on the Border between Old and New, East and West

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Annotation: One of the key features of the image of Vilnius is its position on a symbolic spatial and chronological border. Depending on the ideological agenda of a particular imperial or national discourse, Vilnius can be located on the western or the eastern frontier of the imaginary imperial realm (Russian or German respectively), or as a historic national capital (for Poles, Lithuanians and Belarusians). Correspondingly, different national and imperial narratives evaluated particular historical periods differently, usually portraying the more remote past positively, as opposed to the most recent past. The Russian city guide by Flavian Dobrianskii and the German books by Paul Weber and Paul Monty, published respectively before and during the First World War, described the city from two opposite perspectives using the same conceptual opposition of East versus West. Unlike these dichotomous representations, Jewish Modernist poetry, exemplified by two poems entitled ‘Vilna’, by the Hebrew poet Zalman Shneour and the Yiddish poet Moyshe Kulbak, as well as the Yiddish city guide by Zalmen Szyk, sought to restore the imaginary unity of time and space, celebrating the complexity and diversity of the city.

Keywords: Empire, First World War, nostalgia, multiculturalism, Modernism, city guides.

Vilnius occupies a prominent position in several national mythologies. The Lithuanians and the Belarusians consider Vilnius/Vilnia their historic capital, both claiming for themselves the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. For Poles, Wilno is the second (or the alternative) capital of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Jews often refer to Vilne as the Jerusalem of Lithuania, a symbolic capital of the Jewish Galuth.¹ Both the Russians and the Germans imagine Vilnius

1 For a detailed and insightful comparative analysis of the image of Vilnius in Polish, Lithuanian and Jewish culture, see the excellent study by Valentina Brio (Валентина Брио, Поэзия и поэтика города: *Wilno–וילנָה–Vilnius*, Москва: Новое литературное обозрение, 2008).

as a border city between East and West, though they ascribe opposite values to these categories. Whereas in the Russian imperial mythology, Vilna was the most western stronghold of Eastern Orthodox civilisation, the German imperialists considered it the rearguard outpost of the Western/German world. This paper will focus on two aspects of the mythological chronotope of Vilnius, the spatial and the temporal, and examine their variation in three cultural discourses: Russian, German and Jewish.

The ‘Oriental myth’ of Vilnius

In his personal account of Vilnius, the Lithuanian-American poet and scholar Tomas Venclova mentions a few peculiar historical examples of what can be described as the ‘Oriental myth’ of Vilnius. This myth even influenced his own interests: ‘Mickiewicz believed that the Lithuanians were descended from Indians – indeed, from the Brahmins. Seduced by this myth, I began studying Sanskrit at the University of Vilnius.’² Venclova also tells us that: ‘The Order of Teutonic Knights and all of Europe called the Lithuanians “the Saracens of the North”.’³ Vilnius occupied a significant place in the ‘Sarmatian myth’, popular among the Polish nobility in the 17th century, who believed their origins were to be found in the mythological Sarmatian tribes that once populated the Eurasian steppes. And the Russian claim to Vilnius, Venclova contends, was based on the argument that Christianity was originally brought to Lithuania in its Eastern Orthodox rite, which was later suppressed by the spread of Catholicism from the West. The Poles, however, argued that it was the dynastic union with the Catholic Polish crown that brought European culture to Vilnius. Venclova identifies this historical moment as the decisive turn toward the West: ‘The city and the country as a whole were no longer oriented toward the East, but rather to the West – no longer toward Orthodox Byzantium, but toward the Catholic world of Rome.’⁴ The Jewish variation on the ‘Oriental

² Tomas Venclova, *Vilnius: A Personal History*, tr. Margot Bettauer Dembo, Riverside-on-Hudson, NY: The Sheep Meadow Press, 2009, p. 12.

³ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴ Ibid., p. 41.

myth' of Vilnius, the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania' trope, has long been a cliché. Its appropriation in Jewish literature will be discussed in more detail below, but it is worth mentioning another, somewhat surprising, 'orientalist' twist that appears in the refrain of the popular American Yiddish song of the 1930s by Volfson and Olshnaetski: '*Vilne, Vilne, undzer Meka / undzer benkshaft un bager*' ('Vilne, Vilne, our Mecca / Our longing and desire').⁵ Of course, Mecca in this Yiddish song originally carried no Islamic connotations. It possibly implied that for American Jews, Vilne was an exotic site of spiritual pilgrimage located in some imaginary faraway Orient, which required a significant effort to be reached. However, in post-Second World War renditions of this song, Mecca has been replaced by *heymshtot* (hometown), indicating a spiritual homeland rather than a reachable physical location.⁶ This brief survey shows that the oriental myth of Vilnius was highly flexible, and could be appropriated by different cultures according to their historical circumstances and ideological agendas. Its positive and negative connotations will be elaborated upon below using some examples.

The Russian imperial agenda: restoring the golden age of Eastern Orthodoxy

In many representations of Vilnius, the symbolic spatial East–West dichotomy is complemented by a temporal one, juxtaposing two different pasts. This temporal opposition was articulated by the Russian poet Fyodor Tyutchev in a poem written in 1870, seven years after the January uprising of 1863. Using elaborate metaphorical imagery, Tyutchev's poem succinctly summarises the imperial-nationalist ideology that informed the aggressive policy of Russification aimed

5 Efraim Leyb Volfson, 'Vilne,' in: Ephim Jeshurin, ed., *Vilne: A zamlbukh gevidmet der shtot Vilne* (Vilna: An Anthology Dedicated to the City of Vilnius), New York: Wilner Branch 367 Workmen's Circle, 1935, p. 821.

6 This was noted by Avraham Novershtern, 'Shir halel, shir kina: Dimuya shel Vilna beshirat yidish beyn shtey milhamot ha'olam' (Song of Praise, Song of Sorrow: The Imagery of Vilnius in Yiddish Poetry between the Two World Wars), in: *Mi-Vilna li-Yerushalayim: Mehkarim be-toldotem uve-tarbutam shel yehude Mizrah Eropa mugashim le-profesor Shmuel Verses* (From Vilnius to Jerusalem: Studies in the History and Culture of Jews in Eastern Europe, dedicated to Professor Shmuel Werses), ed. David Assaf et al., Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002, p. 493.

at suppressing Polish political and cultural aspirations after the defeat of the uprising. Tyutchev juxtaposes two different epochs, the *starodavniaia*, literally ‘ancient-old’, the age before the mid-16th century, when Vilnius was solidly Russian and Eastern Orthodox, and the *pozdnee byloe*, ‘most recent past’ (literally ‘later-past’), the period after the unification of Poland and Lithuania in the 16th century, when Polish Catholicism suppressed Russian Orthodoxy. The present age began in 1795, when Vilnius was annexed by Russia as a result of the Third Partition of Poland. Russian Orthodox dominance was restored, casting that recent Polish ‘later-past’ into oblivion: ‘Sacred ways are coming back, / traditions fine of early days. / Only the most recent past / has dropped into the realm of shades.’⁷ But this ‘most recent past’ has not died away completely. It lingers in the netherworld, occasionally disturbing the living: ‘Our very peace of mind / this past still wants to shake’ by appearing as a ‘spectral visitor’ before dawn.⁸ As we shall see, this scheme of contrasting a ‘bad’ recent past against a ‘good’ older past served other ideological agendas equally well.

As the literary historian Pavel Lavrinets noted, the fantasy of the ‘golden age’ of Lithuania between the conversion to Christianity in its Eastern Orthodox rite and the advent of Roman Catholic Polonisation was a popular theme in Russian historical fiction of the late 19th century.⁹ This concept also informs the city guide to Vilnius written by the local Russian historian Flavian Dobrianskii (1848–1919). Three different editions of this book were published (1883, 1890 and 1904), which speaks for its popularity.¹⁰ The ‘Russians’, whom Dobrianskii identifies by language and Eastern Orthodox religion, are portrayed as one of the two indigenous groups. It has been pointed out by scholars such as Theodore Weeks that this ethnic term cannot be correctly applied to the Slavic Eastern Orthodox residents of what is today Western Belarus and Lithuania; however,

7 Frank Jude, tr., <http://knigo.com/t/TUTCHEW/english.html> [Last accessed on 14 August 2020]. The Russian original: ‘Преданье ожило святое / Первоначальных лучших дней, / И только позднее былое / Здесь в царство отошло теней.’ <http://www.fedor-tutchev.ru/poezia241.html>.

8 Ibid., ‘Оттуда смутным сновиденьем / Еще дано ему порой / Перед всеобщим пробуждением / Живых тревожить здесь покой.’ <http://www.fedor-tutchev.ru/poezia241.html>

9 Павел Лавринец, ‘Литва в русской литературе конца XIX – начала XX вв.’, *Mokslo darbai: Literatūra*, 2009, No 51 (2): *Rusistica Vilnensis*, p. 62–65.

10 Флавиан Добрянский, *Старая и новая Вильна: Изздание третье*, Вильна: Типография А. Г. Сыркина, 1904.

describing them as Belarusians would be equally anachronistic.¹¹ According to Dobrianskii, the ‘Russians’ resided mostly in the eastern part of the city, while the western area was populated by various migrants, such as ethnic Lithuanian refugees from Prussia, and local Lithuanian tribes. Here the urban topography acquires symbolic significance by the juxtaposition of the indigenous Russian eastern area and the ‘foreign’ western parts. The ‘Russians’, according to Dobrianskii, were the most enterprising, energetic and culturally and economically advanced group of residents in Vilnius. They made their city a prosperous centre of trade, crafts and Orthodox spirituality; the Russian language was a lingua franca shared by all residents of that multilingual and multicultural city.¹²

The destructive forces came from Poland, in the form of decadent and corrupt aristocratic magnates and Catholic clergy. The decline of Russian Vilnius reached its nadir with the conclusion of the Union of Brest in 1596, which subordinated the Orthodox Church to the authority of the Pope, and created the so-called Uniate (Greek Catholic) Church. Most of the Orthodox clergy were forced to convert to the new church, and many Orthodox churches and convents were transferred to the Uniates. The Union, a triumph of the Counter-Reformation, also brought the Jesuits, who established their academy and began actively suppressing Protestantism, which flourished in Vilnius in the 16th century. Dobrianskii vividly describes the violent anti-Calvinist pogroms perpetrated by the students of the Jesuit academy with the participation of some Jews. As the ‘Russians’ were squeezed out of their traditional economic spheres of commerce and the trades, these occupations were taken over by Jews, who lived symbiotically with the Polish nobility: ‘A Polish magnate is unable to take one step without a Jew.’¹³ According to Dobrianskii, the city’s economy suffered from the Jewish dominance, because of their unscrupulous competitiveness and deceitfulness. The occupation of Vilnius by Muscovite troops in 1655–1665, which in Polish and Jewish historiography is described as a great catastrophe, is presented by Dobrianskii as justified revenge for the oppression of the Russian Orthodox population, inspired by Bohdan Khmelnitski’s uprising in Ukraine.¹⁴

¹¹ Theodore Weeks, *Vilnius between Nations, 1795–2000*, De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015, p. 4–6.

¹² Добрянский, *Старая и новая Вильна*, p. 1–40.

¹³ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 41–82.

Understandably, as a devout Russian Orthodox Christian (he taught history at the Orthodox seminary in Vilnius), Dobrianskii focuses his attention predominantly on Vilnius' Orthodox sites. His guide provides detailed descriptions of not only active churches and chapels, but also those that no longer exist, in order to emphasise the past glory of Orthodoxy. His descriptions of Catholic sites are shorter and less empathetic. The synagogue merits only a few sentences, and the Jewish area receives no attention at all. Dobrianskii concludes by asserting that, after the suppression of the 1863–1864 uprising by Governor-General Mikhail Muraviov, 'Vilna has become a Russian town not only according to its geographical position, but also according to its inner life, its ideals and aspirations.'¹⁵ However, he does not provide any details about how this was achieved, leaving the most recent 40-year period out of his survey.

The German imperial agenda: restoring the golden age of order

German artisans and merchants played an important role in Vilnius from the Middle Ages, as is evinced by the name of the major commercial street of the old town, German Street, and the Lutheran church located in its vicinity. But it was the German occupation during the First World War that brought the city into the broader German, as well as German-Jewish, cultural and geopolitical orbit. Between 1915 and 1918, the German military command energetically implemented the policy of German Work (Deutsche Arbeit), aimed at imposing German domination in all spheres of life, from the economy to culture. The historian of the German occupation of Eastern Europe Vejas Liulevicius explains the cultural aspect of this policy as the imposition of the rigid German institutional structure upon presumably amorphous local ethnic cultural formations: 'Kultur policies "bracketed" native cultures, giving German form to native content. The result might be described as "German in form, ethnic in content". German Work would brace the inchoate, primitive energies of the ethnicities, surrounding their cultures with German institutions.'¹⁶ German imperial ideologues interpreted the

15 Ibid., p. 120.

16 Vejas G. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 114.

local ethnic and cultural diversity as an indication of backwardness and inherent ‘ethnic’ primitivism. The ultimate goal of the German Work programme was to extract the maximum of human and material resources from the area for the German war effort. To implement this policy efficiently, the German occupying authorities supported those segments of local cultures that fitted the German notion of *Kultur*, such as the press, theatre and education, thus inadvertently promoting cultural modernisation, and consolidating national institutions.

The military command Ober Ost, which controlled the civil administration in the area that included today’s Lithuania, parts of Latvia and western Belarus, used art history scholarship to promote the idea of the positive influence of German culture on local art and architecture. Paul Weber, professor of art history at the University of Jena, was put in charge of the programme of preservation of architectural and art-historical monuments in Lithuania. His lectures for German military personnel were published in *Zeitung der 10. Armee* (Newspaper of the Tenth Army), and collected in a handsomely illustrated volume published in 1917.¹⁷ On the heels of Germany’s eastward military advance, Weber rediscovered the ‘forgotten site of art’ in Vilnius, and reclaimed it for the imperial narrative of German *Kultur*. According to his concept, the borderland city of Vilnius was for centuries a field of the *Kulturmampf* between the barbaric East and the civilised West, a struggle that had shaped its urban landscape.

To substantiate the German claim on Vilnius, Weber composed an inventory of its cultural heritage according to the scheme of *Stilgeschichte*, the history of style. From the ruins of the primitive Medieval royal city of the Lithuanian grand dukes, Vilnius’ architectural style adopted the German Gothic during the 15th and 16th centuries, and reached its aesthetic apogee during the 17th-century Jesuit Counter-Reformation, when the Medieval German influence gave way to the Italian Renaissance and Baroque. These styles manifested themselves in the magnificent complex of the university, initially the Jesuit academy, and the grandiose churches. Weber finds the architectural monuments of Classicism, especially its 19th-century Russian variety, less impressive, because they reveal the diminishing of the Western influence. Marginal for his Western-oriented narrative are ‘Muscovite’ churches, Jewish and Mohammedan buildings of

¹⁷ Paul Weber, *Wilna: eine vergessene Kunststätte* (Vilnius: A Forgotten Site of Art), Vilnius: Verlag der *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, 1917. All translations, except where noted, are my own – M. K.

worship, and, finally, the Jewish ‘ghetto’. It was the recent Russian rule, Weber argues, that had cut Vilnius off from its Western roots.¹⁸

Weber regards the half-completed Russian modernisation project of the Vilnius cityscape as ugly and disorderly. He blames the Russians for deliberately destroying the ‘historical heart’ of the city, by erasing the major monuments of the glorious Polish and Lithuanian past, such as the Medieval castle and the city fortifications (which was, of course, typical of the urban modernisation projects across 19th-century Europe, modelled on Hausmann’s Paris), with the purpose of erasing the memory of independence.¹⁹ He is scornful of the most recent Russian religious buildings in the Modernist neo-Byzantine and neo-Slavic style, such as the Romanov Chapel, built to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty. He finds it ‘the most strikingly alien body in the cityscape. There is something brutal in its whole appearance and in its adornment with many shining golden onion domes.’ Viewed from afar in the evening light, the ‘oriental glow’ of these domes may add some picturesque aspects to the historic colours and forms of the city, but at the same time they represent a ‘violent invasion by a foreign power’. Weber concludes: ‘This and many other Muscovite churches and chapels with their colourful domes shifted the balance of the city’s western-eastern character strongly towards the east, and this shift is not organically produced, but violently imposed.’²⁰

In Weber’s view, the lack of uniformity (*Einheitlichkeit*) in Vilnius’ urban space is a product of ‘unreconciled contradictions’ among its diverse ethnic and religious groups. None of those groups has been able to impose full control over the city and shape it according to its taste. This observation leads to the conclusion that it is the duty of ‘German Work’ to bring order to this diversity by restoring the ‘Western’ shape of the city in accordance with the normative German concept of *Kultur*. But the completion of this restorative project depends on the postwar political future of the region, which remains uncertain:

Will it further remain a city of contradictions? Its political future is still undecided.

But this much is certain: in some form it will remain attached to the cultural sphere of the West. Over half a millennium ago, German cultural work began here. Initially,

18 Ibid., p. 121.

19 Ibid., p. 32.

20 Ibid., p. 94–95.

it made something out of the chaotic wooden town. The new German cultural work should now begin again where it was suppressed in the later period.²¹

Somewhat surprisingly, the only part of Vilnius where Weber detects some semblance of stylistic uniformity, albeit not ‘in any way aesthetic’ (*künstlerisch*), is the Medieval Jewish ‘ghetto’. The Medieval Jewish neighbourhood in the city centre is the only area that has remained static, by virtue of being ‘frozen in stone for centuries’ (*jahrhundertlange Versteinerung*), ‘untouched by any transformations of recent centuries’. The Jewish space is homogenous, static, ugly, and resisting stylistic classification. Whereas Weber provides the exact numbers and detailed descriptions of churches of different Christian denominations, he can only mention, in approximate terms, ‘over one hundred *Judenschulen*'.²²

Weber views Vilnius Jews as an old and established group with a strong sense of their own space, but also as the least transparent group to outsiders. He captures the key elements that often figure in various representations of Jewish Vilnius: ‘A maze of narrow streets and alleys, courtyards and passages, often bridged by stone arches. The mostly stone buildings are all equally simple and poor. Small and dark shops are installed in almost every ground floor, and consist of a narrow door and a narrow window. The main activity takes place in long courtyards, which often lead into a labyrinth of interconnected courtyards.’²³ Despite the ugliness of the individual elements, the overall impression is of one of the most coherent areas of the city. The Jewish district has preserved its authenticity because it was not affected by the recent Russian ‘confusion of styles’, owing to the isolation of Jews from the rest of the population. Weber singles out the old synagogue as one of the most interesting architectural monuments in old Vilnius, but dismisses the new one (built in 1903 in a Moorish style which was introduced to Russia from Central Europe) as having no architectural significance. He recommends a visit to the Jewish cemetery, for its ‘highly picturesque groups of much-ruined mausoleums (*Grabhäuser*), some of which are historically fascinating’.²⁴ As a whole, Weber’s conceptualisation of Vilnius as ‘a forgotten site of art’ on the eastern border of Europe is a reflection

21 Ibid., p. 123.

22 Ibid., p. 14.

23 Ibid., p. 119.

24 Ibid., p. 100.

of the German ‘mandscape’ of Eastern Europe as a place lacking in order and centralised power, as described and analysed by Liulevicius.

Notwithstanding the military hostility between Russia and Germany, their views of Vilnius as a borderland city that had to be culturally and politically incorporated into their respective imperial realm had much in common. For the Russians, Vilnius was located on the western frontier of their imperial domains, while for the Germans it marked the eastern frontier of European (and primarily German) civilisation. Both narratives of Vilnius regarded its cultural and ethnic diversity as backward and primitive. Both treated it as rudimentary and deficient, to be improved by imposing a uniform imperial order on the cityscape and population. In both cases, this process involved the restoration of a particular ‘ancient past’ that had been erased by more recent, hostile interventions. The Russians aspired to restore the imaginary pre-Polish Russian city, by building new Orthodox churches and reclaiming old ones that had been taken over by the Catholics and Uniates, as well as erecting monuments to historical figures who represented the Russian Empire, such as Catherine II, the regional governor Mikhail Muraviov, and the poet Alexander Pushkin; incidentally, all three monuments disappeared on the eve of the German takeover of the city in September 1915. The Germans aimed at ordering and reshaping the diversity of the city through German *Kulturarbeit*. Whereas the Russian imperial project aspired to change the very substance of the urban space, making it thoroughly Russian ‘according to its inner life, its ideals and aspirations’, as Dobrianskii put it, the German plan was to impose *Kultur* as an organising force, to give form to the shapeless and primitive local diversity. But it is unclear what plans, if any, Germany had regarding the development of Vilnius’ cityscape. As the war progressed and the economic situation in Germany worsened, the German occupying authorities focused their efforts on plundering local resources and shipping them to Germany.

The German liberal agenda: Vilnius as a site of trauma therapy

Whereas Weber’s vision of Vilnius as a ‘forgotten’ site of European culture in need of ‘German Work’ that would bring it back into the Western cultural sphere reflects the ideology of the German military administration, the attitude

of German liberal intellectuals was somewhat more nuanced and sympathetic to the local diversity. *Wanderstunden in Wilna* (Hours of Wandering in Vilnius), a city guide authored by Paul Monty, was addressed to German soldiers on leave who wanted to explore the city.²⁵ It was published by the civilian German newspaper *Wilnaer Zeitung* (Vilnius Newspaper), which was more liberal in its outlook than the military *Zeitung der 10. Armee* which published Weber's book. *Wanderstunden in Wilna* came out in three editions between 1916 and 1918, which is a sign of its popularity. Its title referred to the neo-Romantic idea, popular among German intellectuals of the early 20th century, that the experience of wandering could restore the lost harmony between modern man and the surrounding world. The author suggests that wandering through the streets of a city can have a therapeutic effect on dehumanised soldiers, bringing them back to the 'normal' human state after spending months in the trenches. Reiterating Weber's view, the introductory section states that the layout of Vilnius lacks the unifying principle typical of other European cities. Its 'organism' has neither sense nor logic, its streets are crooked and not organised around a central 'heart'. The city plan of Vilnius resembles an old man's face. This is attributed to the historical lack of consistent leadership: every new ruler developed the city for his own convenience, making it accommodate his regime.²⁶

Monty is less critical than Weber is of Vilnius' lack of order, and regards the Russian contribution to its development more favourably. His favourite parts of Vilnius are its green spaces, parks and gardens, where the city merges with nature. In the serene Bernardine Garden, German soldiers and local residents can mix freely, listening to the remote sounds of German music, and forgetting for a moment about the war. Although Vilnius has no squares that could serve as public spaces, this function is partly assumed by streets and courtyards. Unlike old German cities, where the Medieval areas are merely moribund historic relics, Vilnius' old city is still full of life.

The most authentic part of Vilnius is the Jewish quarter, with its narrow alleys and interconnected courtyards, which Monty views as precursors to

²⁵ Paul Monty, *Wanderstunden in Wilna*, Vilnius: Verlag der Wilnaer Zeitung, 1918. Paul Monty is a combined pseudonym of two German journalists, Paul Fechter and Monty Jacobs. See more on their work in the article by Laima Laučkaitė 'The Iconography of Jewish Vilna during the First World War' in this issue.

²⁶ Monty, *Wanderstunden in Wilna*, p. 9–12.

modern shopping arcades. It is here that a wandering tourist, a forerunner of the Weimar-era figure of the *flâneur*, can feel the soul of the city. Friday evening is the best time for visiting the Great Synagogue, which is hidden just a few steps away from the busy commercial thoroughfare of German Street: ‘But once we have left this little distance behind us, we walk straight into bygone centuries.’²⁷ To reach the synagogue courtyard, a visitor should follow the stream of black-clad men as they pass by little inconspicuous doors. Each door leads to another prayer house, which serves as a space for intimate gatherings. The courtyard complex of the Great Synagogue has a library, and even a bathhouse, so that one can spend a whole life there, ‘a life of immersion in the fathers’ customs and morals, their teachings and wisdom, at home in remote centuries, and yet just a few steps away from the bustle of Vilnius street life.’²⁸

Around the Great Synagogue, the past coexists with the present. Jews inhabit time in its continuity, living according to their ancient lifestyle, but also fully engaged in today’s concerns. In the Jewish quarter of Vilnius, streets bring people together for communal and commercial activities, in contrast to the oriental cities of Tangier or Algiers, where these activities take place inside households. In Vilnius, the feeling of individual loneliness (*Einsamkeit*) dissolves in the sense of community belonging (*Geselligkeit*). With all their backwardness and chaos, the Jews of Vilnius collectively embody the lost sense of premodern communal intimacy. A visit to their ‘ghetto’ can have a healing, restorative effect on the soul of a soldier who has been psychologically damaged by the war. Evidently, Monty’s perception of Vilnius was influenced by the dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* versus *Gesellschaft* (community versus society), which was introduced by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887 and became popular among German intellectuals. Monty discovered the lost ideal of communal unity in the traditional way of life of the Jewish residents of Vilnius’ Old Town.

Dobrianskii, Weber and Monty, each in his own way, responded to the intellectual trend that can be described as Medieval nostalgia. Dobrianskii and Weber, articulating their respective Russian or German imperial agendas, maintained that modern-day Vilnius had suffered from recent decline, and was

27 Ibid., p. 62.

28 Ibid., p. 67.

to be reconstructed according to a particular model of the Medieval ‘usable past’, whether Russian or European/German. Using Svetlana Boym’s terminology, one can describe this attitude as ‘restorative nostalgia’. Monty envisioned the city as an organic whole, with a specific character that was structurally different from a typical European city. The disorderly layout was not a defect but a peculiar feature, which united not only its diverse communities, but also different ages. This position comes close to what Boym described as ‘reflective nostalgia’.²⁹ The temporal unity between past and present was felt especially strongly in the Jewish ‘ghetto’ in the Old Town. The experience of immersion in its atmosphere could even have a therapeutic effect on German soldiers traumatised by the war.

The German Jewish agenda: discovering the Ostjude

In the editorial essay opening the first (1916) issue of what would become the leading Jewish intellectual journal in German, *Der Jude* ('The Jew'), the prominent Prague Zionist Hugo Bergmann wrote:

It is certain that this war, with its great upheavals, will open a new chapter in our age-old passive history. But whether the active history of the Jewish people [*Volk*] will receive a powerful impulse from it depends on the ability of Jewish individuals [*Menschen*] to experience the war not just as a time of misery but also a time of action.³⁰

Bergmann’s words were quoted in an enthusiastic review of the first volume (1916) of Moyshe Szalit’s *Vilner zamlbukh* (Vilnius Anthology) by Max Mayer. Mayer wrote that the materials published in that collection proved that ‘the Jews of Vilnius have resolved the question of who will become the face of the Jewish history of our time, a refugee or a hero.’ He described how the entire Jewish population of Vilnius came out to help the refugees who were expelled by the Russian military command from the Kovno (Kaunas) gubernia. Despite all the deprivations of the German military occupation, hunger, disease and poverty,

29 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 41–55.

30 Hugo Bergmann, ‘Der jüdische Nationalismus nach dem Krieg’, *Der Jude* 1 (1916), p. 7.

‘wrapped in rags, with empty stomachs, shining eyes, in the supreme fervour of their true being’, the Vilnius Jews concentrated their efforts on rebuilding their cultural institutions, first of all, Jewish schools. This was the ‘war testament’ (*Kriegsvermächtnis*) that Vilnius Jews left to history, Mayer concluded his review.³¹ Understandably, writing for a German publication during the war, Mayer would not mention the real reasons for the physical deprivations of Vilnius’ Jews: namely, the restrictions that the German occupying regime placed on trade and commerce, which robbed the Jewish population of its livelihood.

Ober Ost employed a number of German Jewish intellectuals, among them Sammy Gronemann, Arnold Zweig, Hermann Struck and others, who developed great sympathy and compassion for local Jews. In a short story entitled ‘Die Schmuckstücke von Wilna’ (Jewellery from Vilna), dated to the end of 1917, Zweig described, speaking in the first person, a visit by a German soldier in 1917 to Vilnius’ ‘bewildering and exciting Old Town’ (*verwirrende und erregende Altstadt*). As if following one of Monty’s itineraries, Zweig’s narrator walks around the city, admiring its Gothic and Baroque architecture, and the multitude of different cultures that coexist peacefully side by side. Along the way, he comes across a little shop with exquisite pieces of jewellery, among them a beautiful amber chain. When he asks the shopkeeper, a young Jew of ‘noble type’ (*vornehmen Typs*), about the price, it turns out to cost less than a pound of tea or cocoa. From a contemporary perspective, this detail, which makes clear the dire poverty of Vilnius Jews forced to sell their precious jewellery to buy food, seems to clash with the story’s overall elegiac tone. Was the narrator, and presumably Zweig, so blind to the destitution caused by the German occupation? While Mayer’s reluctance to mention the negative effects of the occupation can be explained by wartime censorship considerations, Zweig’s story was published in 1924, when one could speak openly about them. Perhaps Zweig’s fascination with imaginary Ostjuden prevented him from seeing the real picture. Zweig concluded his story on a hopeful note: ‘The time is ripe with decisive things. Jews, Lithuanians and Poles see a turning point before them.’³² The Germans quietly withdrew from the looted area, taking some precious objects as souvenirs, and leaving it to the locals to sort things out for themselves.

31 Max Mayer, ‘Wilnas Kriegsvermächntis’, *Der Jude* 2 (1917), p. 130.

32 Arnold Zweig, ‘Die Schmuckstücke von Wilna’, *Menorah* 11 (November 1924), p. 11–12.

Like Monty, Zweig views the local cultural diversity favourably, and he also perceives it as a relic of the past. He is hopeful about future opportunities for all local nationalities, including Jews, presumably under German control. In 1920, he published the book *Das ostjüdische Antlitz* (The Face of East European Jewry), which became particularly popular among German Jewish readers. Zweig constructed his collective portrait of Lithuanian Jewry around the contrast between the ‘authentic’ elderly Jews, untouched by modern individualism, and the younger generation, infected by modern revolutionary ideas. He admired the traditional Lithuanian Jewish community, where ‘one Jew is barely distinguished from the next’, appropriating the orientalising tropes, but interpreting them positively.³³ He envisioned these Jews as ‘human beings who did not defend themselves’, but regarded their powerlessness as a strength rather than a weakness: ‘The people that does not defend itself will finally triumph [...] it will not be destroyed.’³⁴ Paradoxically, weak and defenceless Jews emerge victorious from the devastating war, while the Germans, who valued strength and vigour, turn out to be losers. Traditional Lithuanian Jews managed to survive the calamities of the modern age, not by adjusting to the progress of history, but by remaining true to their inner spiritual essence. The main danger to that age-old stability of East European Jewry comes not from the outside but from their own youth, infected by revolutionary socialist ideas. Many young Jews, especially women, were tempted to sacrifice their lives for the universalist, socialist cause, abandoning their own people and destroying their cohesiveness.

A portrait of a modern Jewish woman from Lithuania was presented in an impressionistic account of the newly occupied territory entitled *Skizzen aus Litauen, Weissrussland und Kurland* (Sketches from Lithuania, Belarus and Courland). This book, published in Berlin and printed at the printing press of Ober Ost in 1916, consists of series of one-page sketches written by the liberal German writer Herbert Eulenberg, accompanied by drawings by the prominent Zionist artist Hermann Struck, both of whom were serving in the German army. A chapter entitled ‘Rachel’ introduces an intelligent young middle-class woman, apparently from Vilnius. She ‘neither speaks nor understands *Jargon*

³³ Arnold Zweig, *The Face of East European Jewry*, tr. Noah Isenberg, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008, p. 7.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

[Yiddish]. *Khas vesholem!* God forbid, I would say. She hates speaking Yiddish. She converses only in Russian or French. She reads Heine in German, and knows what Nietzsche meant by *Uebermensch*. Of course, she knows! And she gets angry that we are surprised by her knowledge.³⁵ Its palpably condescending irony notwithstanding, this portrayal presents Rachel as an aspirational modern European woman, who stands in sharp contrast to the older and traditional male Jewish types portrayed in other sketches.

In the eyes of liberal German Jewish intellectuals, Vilnius was a meeting space between the past and the present, where they coexisted side by side. The secluded Medieval space of the Old Town inhabited by Jews had for centuries protected their communal unity, and enabled them to live in the past and present simultaneously. Influenced by the popular notion of *Gemeinschaft*, an authentic organic community, as opposed to the modern individualist *Gesellschaft*, and inspired by Zionist ideology, which sought to implement this concept in the utopian Jewish society of the future, they discovered its model in the imaginary ‘authentic’ Jewish community of Vilnius’ Old Town. Its main feature was a remarkable resilience to historical changes, a resilience rooted in the community’s collective spirituality. But when young Lithuanian Jews, seduced by new cultural, intellectual and political trends, abandoned the old ways of their ancestors and left their historic habitat, they lost their spiritual élan, and became mere provincial epigones of European modernity.

Jewish Modernism: the old-new Jerusalem of Lithuania in interwar Poland

Both Germany’s and Russia’s imperial ambitions to appropriate the Lithuanian-Belorussian borderlands had been abandoned by the end of the First World War, and the Vilnius area was eventually incorporated into the newly reconstituted Second Republic of Poland. But these aborted projects of imperial modernisation left their mark on the Jews of Vilnius, making the city different from other Jewish centres in Poland. When the German Jewish author Alfred Döblin visited Poland

³⁵ Hermann Struck, Herbert Eulenberg, *Skizzen aus Litauen, Weissrussland und Kurland*, Berlin: Verlag von Georg Stilke, 1916, p. 45.

in 1923, he noted a difference between Jewish ways in Vilnius and Warsaw. In Vilnius, Jews spoke Yiddish and Russian, but rarely Polish. Yiddish signs and posters could be seen all over the city, and not just in the Yiddish district, as in Warsaw. By contrast to Warsaw, Yiddish-speaking Jews in Vilnius wore modern clothes and were indistinguishable from the rest of the population:

There seems to be a very large or very courageous Jewish population here. Yet I don't see any Jews [...]. Individual Jews must be standing around, even if it's a holiday. And now I notice that I do see them but don't notice them. They stand next to me outside the movie house, walk about in white caps, young men and girls; older ones slowly crossing the bumpy square, conversing in their language. No one wears a caftan! I see no one in a black 'capote.' They all wear European clothes – and yet do not speak Polish. This is a different breed of Jews than in Warsaw.³⁶

For Döblin, Vilnius Jews represented a peculiar case of cultural hybridity. They looked and behaved like modern Europeans, but were proud of their ethnic and cultural identity as Yiddish-speaking Jews.

Whereas the Russian and German imperial discourses, and later the Polish and Lithuanian nationalist ones, which claimed ownership of Vilnius, considered hybridity as a sign of backwardness and weakness, the Jewish discourse viewed the city's spatial and temporal heterogeneity as an opportunity for Jewish revival. In the aftermath of the First World War, Jewish intellectuals in Vilnius proudly promoted their city as a special case, and a potential source of inspiration for other communities. In the preface to the monumental collection *Pinkes far der geshikhthe fun Vilne in di yorn fun milkhome un okupatsye* (Chronicle of the History of Vilnius during the Years of the War and Occupation), its editor Zalmen Reyzen introduced the publication as a model case study of a successful modern nation-building project in the Diaspora. The case of Vilnius was special in two respects, he explained: first, the city had an illustrious intellectual and spiritual Jewish legacy; and second, its historical multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious composition prevented any single group from establishing its domination over the life of the city. The collapse of Russian imperial rule during the war, the material deprivations under the Germans, and the vital necessity of negotiating

36 Alfred Döblin, *Journey to Poland*, tr. Joachim Neugroschel, London: I. B. Tauris, 1991, p. 86.

with different groups and authorities on a daily basis, forced Vilnius Jews to create new communal structures.³⁷

At the symbolic level, cultural exchange between different groups has deep historical roots in Vilnius. Today, the trope ‘the Jerusalem of Lithuania’ is largely associated with pre-Second World War Vilnius as the city of Jewish learning. But, as Laimonas Briedis tells us in his study of multiculturalism in Vilnius:

For local Catholics, the name Jerusalem had a different meaning. In the 1660s, in gratitude for the deliverance of Lithuania from Russian occupation, the local Catholic bishop set up a pathway of Via Dolorosa on a hilly, forested bank of the Neris River, north of the city. This Baroque replica of Calvary became a major pilgrimage site in Lithuania, and had an imprint on local toponymy: a nearby brook was renamed Cedron and the neighboring village acquired the name of Jerusalem, which is still used to this day.³⁸

In the wake of the First World War, this trope was creatively appropriated by Hebrew and Yiddish Modernist poets. Zalman Shneour’s Hebrew poem ‘*Vilna*’, originally composed in Berlin in 1917, and first published in New York in 1919, projects Jerusalem on to the Vilnius cityscape from a vantage point on Castle Hill, which the poet evocatively calls *Har haheykhal*, literally ‘The Temple Mountain’.³⁹ This parallel between the site of the ruined pagan Lithuanian temple *heykhal-perun* (Shneour uses the Slavic variation Perun for the name Perkūnas, the main god in the Baltic and Slavic pagan pantheons) and the ruined Jewish temple in Jerusalem adds a new radical Modernist dimension to the old trope. Shneour presents a detailed guide to Jewish Vilnius, identifying its key landmarks, such as the building of the Romm publishing house (where his first collection of poetry was published), and the tree on the grave of Ger tsedek (the legendary figure of Count Potocki, who allegedly converted to Judaism in the 18th century, and was burned at the stake by the Christian

³⁷ Zalmen Reyzen, ed., *Pinkes far der geshikhte fun Vilne in di yorn fun milkhome un okupatsye*, Vilnius: Yidishe historish-etnografische gezelshaft oyfn nomen fun Sh. An-ski, 1922, p. v.

³⁸ Laimonas Briedis, *Vilnius: City of Strangers*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2009, p. 131.

³⁹ Zalman Shneour, *Vilna*, Berlin: Hasefer, 1923, p. 10. In his own partial Yiddish translation of this poem, Shneour chose to render this site more literally as ‘*shlosbarg*’ (Castle Hill, ‘Vilne,’ in: Jeshurin, *Vilne*, p. 781).

authorities). In Vilnius, the line goes, ‘Layers upon layers of dead eras have accumulated.’⁴⁰

Whereas Shneour’s poem celebrates the city’s glorious past in a somewhat nostalgic, neo-Romantic key, from a distance in space and time, Eliyohu Yankev Goldshmidt’s Yiddish poem ‘Tsu Vilne’ (1922) and Moyshe Kulbak’s ‘Vilne’ are situated in the present, after the First World War. The literary historian Valentina Brio argues that ‘Tsu Vilne’ offers a ‘model which, to a lesser or greater degree, can be found in poetic works by different Yiddish authors of that time’.⁴¹ The second part of the poem reproduces popular images and motifs that are typically attributed to the Jewish picture of Vilnius. Goldshmidt inverts Weber’s dichotomy between modern Western order and Eastern disarray, by juxtaposing the ‘harmonic’ disorder of the Jewish area to the orderly style of Christian architecture: ‘With all its crooked streets / alleyways, passages and squares, / curved, crooked and twisted, / like Medieval labyrinths, strangely entangled, / and with clumsy buildings of yours – / entire little towns – / built with no plan, no form, no order / randomly and without decorations ... / no symmetry – but still, so wonderfully harmonious.’⁴² The harmony of the architecture of the Jewish area resides in its intimate familiarity, rather than in a calculated symmetrical order. Goldshmidt compares houses to ‘groups of children, infants and devoted mothers, / here they are scattered and now they are together – / they all stretch / down, down to the Viliya’.⁴³ The River Viliya reminds the poet of the Shiloah spring in Jerusalem. The ancient Gediminas Hill (Castle Hill) protects the city, inviting another association with Jerusalem, and the panoramic view of the city from the site has the therapeutic function of easing anxiety and healing heartache (*hartsik payn*). From this hill, a local equivalent of the Temple Mount, Vilnius looks like Jerusalem: ‘exactly like that

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Брио, Поэзия и поэтика города: *Wilno-וילנַס-Vilnius*, p. 158.

⁴² Quoted in: Zalmen Szyk, *Toyznt yor Vilne*, pt. 1, Vilnius: Gezalshaft fun landkantenish in Poyln, 1939, p. 323: ‘mit ale krume gasn zayne / geslekh, geselekh un pletser, / farkrimte, oysgekrimte un fardreyte, / vi labrintn modne mitlalterlekh farplontert / un mit di umgelumperte binyonim dayne – / gantse kleyne shtetlekh – / geboye on a plan un on a shnit, on seyder / gants tsufelik un on baputsung... / keyn shum simetrie – un dokh vi vunderlekh harmonish.’

⁴³ Ibid.: ‘di kupkes kinder, kinderlekh un getraye mames / tsevorfn do un bald ineynem – / tsien zey zikh ale / arop – arop tsu der Vilie.’

wonderful city of the Orient, / whose name is given to you.⁴⁴ One can see far into the surrounding hills and forests, including the ‘Cross Mountain’, the hill with three crosses commemorating the January Uprising of 1863. This image completes the parallel with Jerusalem in a rather daring way for a Jewish poet, by bringing a local replica of Golgotha into the picture: ‘I see your mountains and hills, / the beautiful “cross mountains” and the hills of Antokol.’⁴⁵ Perhaps the most significant Jewish site visible from that vantage point is the old cemetery across the River Wilejka (Vilnia), with the graves of illustrious historical heroes such as Ger tsedek and the Gaon.

Kulbak’s poem ‘Vilne’ complicates Goldshmidt’s rather straightforward allegorical imagery. It opens on a melancholy note with the introduction of an enigmatic character called *ver* (literally, ‘who’ or ‘someone’): ‘Upon your walls someone is walking around in a tallis. / At night in the city he alone, awake, is sad.’⁴⁶ This image is anachronistic, since the city walls had been demolished in the early 19th century; but, as Jordan Finkin suggests, it ‘may well be a biblical echo here of Isaiah 62:6: “Upon your walls, Jerusalem, have I set watchmen; neither day nor nights shall they ever be still”.’⁴⁷ One can perhaps also think of the spectre of the recent past from Tyutchev’s poem that appears before dawn. This image can serve as just one example of what Brio describes as Kulbak’s ‘stylistics of oxymoron’. The poet deliberately juxtaposes contrasting images and attributes within the same complex metaphor, creating an effect of ambiguity: joy and sadness, festivals and funerals, day and night. Brio writes: ‘This contrasting stylistics creates an unexpected “city-oxymoron”, united in its semantic contrast.’⁴⁸ Kulbak’s Vilnius is like a meeting ground of the old and the new forms of Jewishness, and can serve as a good illustration

44 Ibid., p. 326. ‘punkt vi yene vundershot fun orient, / vos m’hot ir nomen dir gegebn.’

45 Ibid.: ‘ikh ze di berg dayne un higlekh, / di sheyne ‘kreyts-berg’ un di higlen fun Antokol.’

46 Moyshe Kulbak, ‘Vilne,’ in: *Ale verk fun Moyshe Kulbak*, Vol. 2, Vilnius: Kletskin, 1929, p. 177: ‘Oyf dayne moyern geyt ver arumet in a tales. / Baynakht ibern shtot iz er aleyn a troyeriker oyf.’ An English translation by Jordan Finkin can be found in ‘Yiddish Ethnographic Poetics and Moyshe Kulbak’s “Vilne”,’ in: *Writing Jewish Culture: Paradoxes in Ethnography*, eds. Andreas Kircher, Gabriella Safran, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 210, p. 110.

47 Finkin, ‘Yiddish Ethnographic Poetics and Moyshe Kulbak’s “Vilne”,’ p. 105. Novershtern also traces this connection, in: ‘Shir halel, shir kina,’ p. 496.

48 Брио, Поэзия и поэтика города: *Wilno-וילַנו-Vilnius*, p. 214.

of Avraham Novershtern's general observation that Yiddish poetry portrayed Vilnius as a place of 'the joint existence of different cultural worlds, tradition and modernity'.⁴⁹ Here come together 'white, pale Talmudic prodigies from faraway Lithuania' (*vayse, blanke geonym fun vayter Lite*), a Bundist in a red shirt, and a 'blue student' reading 'grey Bergelson'. In line with this stylistic method, Yiddish is compared to a wreath of oak leaves, a typical Lithuanian folk decoration. Kulbak's Lithuania is a twilight space between day and night, 'for the sun has never risen over Lithuania', and Vilnius is a cold, misty, mossy, moist and muddy place. Kulbak's Vilnius is a product of a mystical imagination, hovering between reality and dream, a 'dark amulet (*kameye*) set in Lithuania'. In the conclusion, the lyrical hero ecstatically proclaims his identification with the city of contrasts: 'I am the grey! I am the black flame! I am the city!'⁵⁰

The poems by Goldshmidt and Kulbak, and many other Yiddish literary works, form an integral part of Zalmen Szyk's ambitious project of creating a comprehensive Yiddish guide through the complex chronotope of Vilnius. His initial plan was to capture the unique 'old-new' character of Vilnius, to show its 'face' (which, as we recall, Monty compared to an old man's face), to portray its 'alcoves, antiquities, landscapes', something no other writer had done so far in any language. As we know, the project remained unfinished, due to the outbreak of the Second World War, and the second volume, presumably dealing with modern Vilnius, is lost. Szyk's historical narrative follows the general Polish storyline, which asserts that there was a significant degree of Polish acculturation of Vilnius Jews between the early 1920s, when Döblin visited the city, and the late 1930s. Szyk downplays the Russian influence on the city, and portrays it as largely negative and destructive. Listing the various nationalities in the population of Vilnius, he does not even mention Russians; nor does he discuss the significance of the city to Russian culture.

According to this narrative, it was Grand Duke Jogaila (later the Polish king Władysław II Jagiełło) who developed Vilnius as a European city, using Krakow as a model and 'introducing Polish spiritual and moral culture in Lithuania'.⁵¹ From Krakow, he imported not only nobility, the military and courtiers, but also

⁴⁹ Novershtern, 'Shir halel, shir kinha,' p. 493.

⁵⁰ Finkin, 'Yiddish Ethnographic Poetics and Moyshe Kulbak's "Vilne",' p. 112; Kulbak, 'Vilne,' p. 183: 'Ikh bin dos groy! Ikh bin der shvartser flam! Ikh bin di shtot.'

⁵¹ Szyk, *Toyznt yor Vilne*, p. 21.

artists, craftsmen and merchants. Like Monty and Zweig, Szyk argues that the religious struggle between the three major Christian denominations stimulated the development of cultural and spiritual life in Vilnius, which experienced its ‘golden age’ in the 15th and 16th centuries. The Russian invasion in the mid-17th century, followed by the Great Northern War, ended in a terrible catastrophe. The Russians destroyed the most beautiful monuments, including the city walls. Adopting the Polish perspective, Szyk describes the period of Russian rule during the ‘long’ 19th century as a series of failed attempts by Poles to regain their cultural and political autonomy. The incorporation of the Vilnius region into Poland in 1922 is described as the result of a ‘nearly unanimous’ decision by the city Sejm, without mention of any political controversy.

Krakow, too, played a decisive role in developing Jewish life in Vilnius.⁵² Whereas Poles imposed various restrictions on Jewish trade, occupations and settlement, and even established a Jewish ghetto, the Russian invasion practically destroyed the Jewish community in 1655, and the Jews were only able to return with the Poles in 1661. The historical survey of Jewish life ends with the Third Partition, which resulted in the incorporation of Vilnius into the Russian Empire, so that the entire 19th century is not included in the Jewish narrative of Vilnius. Szyk provides a detailed description of Vilnius’ streets, sometimes house by house. He singles out the shulhoif, ‘a shtetl for itself’, whose inhabitants are closely connected; his description resembles the impression of Arnold Zweig that old-time traditional Jews look alike and lack individuality.⁵³ As in a shtetl, any newcomer is immediately noticed by the locals, and sent to an appropriate place of worship and study, according to how they perceive his social status and occupation. Synagogues and prayer houses serve as communal sites of memory, reinforcing the image of ‘the Jerusalem of Lithuania’ by their legends and historical anecdotes.

Comparing Szyk’s guide to the Polish guide *Wilno* by Juliusz Kłos (1937), which apparently served as Szyk’s blueprint, Marcos Silber notes:

Whereas the guide in Polish aestheticizes architectural objects, placing them in a Polish historical frame, thus reinforcing a hierarchical order rooted in aesthetic

52 Ibid., p. 32.

53 Ibid., p. 171.

parameters of Polish culture, the Yiddish book struggles for equal recognition on many levels, presenting the space as one of intermingling cultures, traditions, and religions. On the one side of the spectrum, there is a Polish city with marginal non-Polish peripheral enclaves; on the other, there is a fairly peaceful multilingual, multireligious, and multinational city, a place of rather tolerant coexistence, where the tensions are actually ‘history’.⁵⁴

Silber sums up: ‘The Yiddish guidebook presents the urban space in a way affirming the right to equality, inclusion and shared power, as an idealized picture that leaves no space for mention of the tense and even violent relationships between the groups.’⁵⁵

Conclusions

As we have seen from this incomplete survey, the rich and complex history of Vilnius provides ample material for different historical narratives. All of these narratives that have emerged since the late 19th century actively engage nostalgia, as an instrument for creating their own image of the city and embedding it within their respective national or imperial restorative projects.⁵⁶ For the Russian and German imperial projects prior to and during the First World War, Vilnius marked, both physically and symbolically, the frontier of their imperial realms, the western frontier in the case of the Russian Empire, and the eastern frontier in the case of Germany. For the Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian nationalist projects, Vilnius was important as the historical capital of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Politically, these claims were difficult to reconcile, as only one contender could win this competition. Using Svetlana Boym’s dichotomy between restorative and reflective nostalgia, we can say that

⁵⁴ 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*, ed. Nicholas Berg et al., Göttingen: Vanderhoek & Ruprescht, 2011, p. 141.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 140.

⁵⁶ Venclova perceptively analyses nostalgic representations of Vilnius in Polish and Lithuanian culture in his 2010 essay ‘Vilnius: The City as Object of Nostalgia’, <https://www.eurozine.com/vilnius-the-city-as-object-of-nostalgia/> [Last accessed 3 March 2020].

the winner would try to impose its restorative vision, sometimes through active intervention in the urban space, but more often by means of education and propaganda. The losers would have recourse to reflective nostalgia, evoking the lost city in poetry, fiction and art. The restorative projects tried to draw clear borderlines, both in space and in time, between the legacy they claimed as their own, which was therefore useful, and the rest, which they declared to be alien and foreign, and therefore useless for their project. The reflective projects were more inclusive, imagining the past as a multi-ethnic and multicultural harmony. Unlike all five of these nations, Jews never had any political claim to Vilnius. The Jewish narrative of the Jerusalem of Lithuania fashioned Vilne as the spiritual capital of the Diaspora, and engaged in reflective nostalgia by imagining the city outside the physical confines of space and time.

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Vilne, Vilne Undzer Meka: miestas, tarp sena ir nauja, Rytų ir Vakarų

S a n t r a u k a

Vilniui tenka išskirtinė vieta daugelio tautų mitologijoje. Ne tik lietuviai Vilnių, bet ir baltarusiai, Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės paveldą laikydamai savu, *Bižnja* laiko savo istorine sostine. Lenkams *Wilno* yra antroji (arba alternatyvioji) Abiejų Tautų Respublikos sostinė. Žydaiv *Vilnq* dažnai vadina Lietuvos Jeruzale, simbolinė žydų diasporos sostine. Tieki rusai, tiek vokiečiai Vilnių įsivaizduoja kaip ribą tarp Rytų ir Vakarų, nors šioms kategorijoms suteikia skirtinges reikšmes. Prieš Pirmąjį pasaulinį karą ir jo metu išeistuose Flaviano Dobrianskio rusiškame, Paulo Weberio ir Paulo Monty vokiškuose vadovuose Vilnius aprašytas iš priešingų perspektyvų, remiantis konceptualia Rytų ir Vakarų opozicija. Rusams Vilnius buvo jų imperinės įtakos vakarinis pakraštys, o vokiečiams žymėjo rytinę europietiškosios (visų pirma – vokiškosios) civilizacijos ribą. Abiem atvejais Vilniaus kultūrinė ir etninė įvairovė laikyta trūkumu, kurį reikėjo pašalinti pasitelkiant bendrą, miesto architektūrai ir miestelėnų gyvenimui pritaikytą imperinės tvarkos modelį. Tai buvo troškimas atkurti „senąją praeitį“, kurią užgožė

prieštarlingos naujovės. O štai žydų modernistinės poezijos krypčiai priskiriamų poetų – hebraiškai kūrusio Zalmano Šneuro ir jidiš kalba rašiusio Moišės Kulbako eileraščiuose apie Vilnių, taip pat Zalmeno Šyko jidiš kalba išleistame vadove po Vilnių siekta atkurti įsivaizduojamą laiko ir erdvės vienovę, šlovinti miesto daugialypumą ir įvairovę.

Raktažodžiai: imperija, Pirmasis pasaulinis karas, nostalgija, daugiakultūriškumas, modernizmas, vadovai po miestą.
