

DOVID KATZ



Lithuanian Jewish Culture

מהזור

לש לש רגלים

עם החפלות עפי נוסח אשכנז הנהוג בארצנו

עם הבאורים

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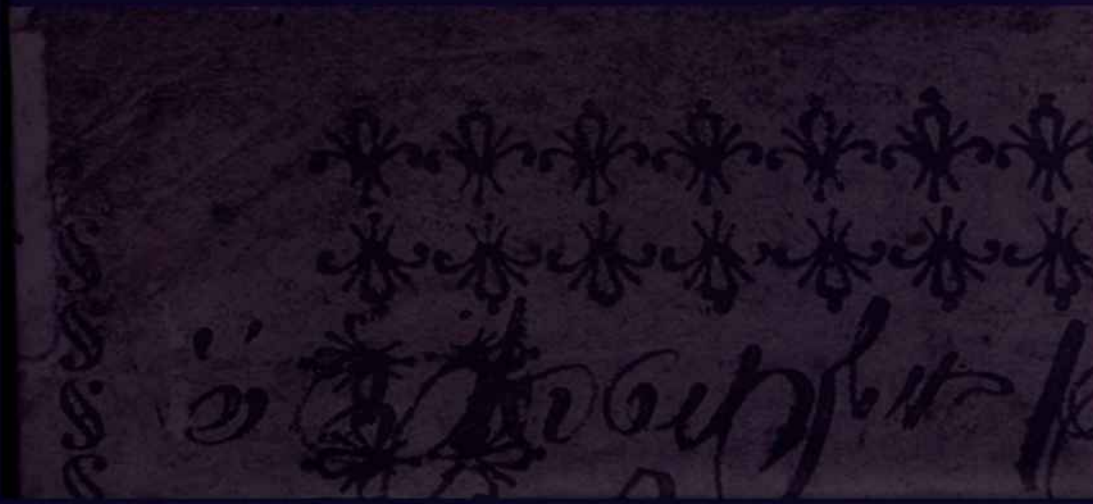
Lithuanian Jewish Culture
by Dovid Katz

BALTOS LANKOS of Vilnius is proud to publish Dovid Katz's monumental Lithuanian Jewish Culture. It is the most comprehensive work ever to appear in English on the cultural, linguistic and spiritual worlds of the Litvaks.

The Litvaks are the Jews hailing from the lands of the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its successor modern states — Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, and parts of northern Ukraine and northeastern Poland.

This exquisite huge folio volume provides an introduction to Jewish history and culture starting with antiquity and leading methodically to the rise of Lithuanian Jewry some seven centuries ago. It covers the traditional rabbinic culture of Ashkenazic Jewry, the specifically Lithuanian rabbinic and kabbalistic (mystical) traditions, and the Hasidic-Misnagdic conflict. It carries on to cover the various modernistic 19th and 20th century movements, including Yiddishism, Hebraism, Zionism, Socialism, and Jewish Art. Sections are also devoted to the life of the Litvaks in the interwar republics, in emigration centers in America and Israel, and around the world today, including the post-Holocaust remnant of survivors in Eastern Europe. Professor Katz has spent a decade and a half leading expeditions to discover and record these survivors. For the first time, a book on Lithuanian Jewry appears with equal emphasis on religious and secular Jewish life. The chapter on Lithuanian Jewry's most famous scholar, the Gaon of Vilna (1720—1797) contains a complete translation of the never-before translated biography of the Gaon penned by his two sons shortly after his death. It is in many ways astounding, and its more unusual aspects are usually left unmentioned in works on the Gaon. There are also translations of various other never-before-translated excerpts from vital works in the field in Hebrew, Aramaic and Yiddish.

This 400 page volume contains 325 rare photographic images collected by the author, many appearing in print for the first time. There are also 26 maps and charts, all of which are newly produced specially for this volume by Dr. Giedrė Beconytė of Vilnius University's Center for Cartography.



Lithuanian Jewish Culture

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by **Dovid Katz**

Vilnius University

baltos lankos



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Kęstutis Vasiūnas

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Sergej Dolžancko

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IMAGE CREDITS

Images of prewar Vilna and its region are from the Leyzer Ran collection, with the generous permission of his daughter, Professor Eaye Ran (New York). The reader should be apprised at the outset of Leyzer Ran's three-volume *Jerusalem of Lithuania* (New York 1974), a magnificent visual survey with accompanying text in four languages (see p. 267 and the bibliography, for further details).

Many images in the volume derive from the Tomasz Wisniewski Collection in Białystok, Poland. Sincere thanks to Mr. Wisniewski for allowing their use in this volume.

The facsimile of the handwriting of the Gaon of Vilna is reproduced by the kind permission of Dr. Neil Rosenstein of Elizabeth, New Jersey.

TRANSLATION CREDITS

The translations of Yiddish, Hebrew and Aramaic texts included in this volume are by Dovid Katz, with the exception of Biblical passages which are often based on the King James renditions. The translation of the 1389 Charter of Witold (Vitautas) from Old Belarusian, on pp. 21-22, is by Ales Gostew, Ludmilla Makedonskaya (both of Grodna) and Rūta Puišytė (Vilnius).

Dovid Katz
Vilnius, 2004

Acknowledgments and Notes

(reprint of 2010)

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This is a reprint with corrections and some updates rather than a new edition, which remains a project for the future. The author is particularly grateful to Dr. Vincent Homolka (London) and Professor Sid Z. Leiman (Brooklyn College and Yeshiva

University) for their many valuable comments and corrections. The author alone is responsible for remaining errors and faults.

Most of the elderly Jewish personalities whose photographs appear in the chapter “Today” (pp. 355-367) are no longer alive. Their inclusion reflects the surviving scene in the first years of the twenty-first century.

The author’s subsequent work in the field of Lithuanian Jewish culture is in some measure recorded at his website, www.dovidkatz.net, and particularly on the site’s “Lithuania” and “Atlas” pages.

Dovid Katz
Vilnius, 2010

Note on Transcription

In the study of Jewish culture and history, issues of transcription go beyond the realm of standardization and convenience. They go to the heart of a question that is essential in all cultural studies. Are different cultures (or subcultures) worthy of study and inherently of equal legitimacy, or is the politically most powerful the one and only “correct” version, all others being erroneous? The answer is self-evident.

The common practice of imposing modern Israeli (“Sephardic”) pronunciation and transcription on the cultural realia of Ashkenazic Jewry, and particularly East European Jewry, has well-known roots. It stems from the (understandable) mid-twentieth century rush to standardize all and everything on the basis of the choices of the new State of Israel. It also has roots in the (rather unfortunate) lack of respect of much of the Jewish establishment for its own Eastern European Jewish heritage.

Now that the study of East European Jewish culture is properly appreciated, it is important to take note of its linguistic richness and internal diversity. There are three languages to take into account, the universal vernacular of the culture, Yiddish, and its

two traditional sacred languages, Hebrew and Aramaic. This may all be done without technical phonetic symbols thanks to the excellent transcriptional system of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York, which is based on the English-friendly values of consonants and classic European renditions of cardinal vowels. In short: *sh* as in English *shall*; *kh* as in *Kharkov*, the “guttural” often spelled *ch* in popular usage (as in *Chanukah* or *Loch Ness*); *tsh* as in *Mitch* or *choose*; *a* similar to American *o* in *pot*; *o* similar to British *pot*; *e* as in *pet*; *i* as in *thin* or *three*, *u* as in *look* or *true* (but without diphthongization); the diphthongs are *ey* as in *they*, *ay* as in *aye aye*, and, *oy* as in *Reuters* (but shorter than the English counterparts). It is important to keep in mind that in unstressed position (most frequently in a syllable following the stressed syllable), *e* is a reduced shewa-type vowel.

A Litvak who is called *Shólem*, greets his friend with a handshake and a *Shólem-aléykhem* (to which the friend replies: *Aléykhem-shólem*). The word for “peace” is *shólem*. In a popular Friday night prayer that is sung by all the family, the informal Hebrew Ashkenazic *sholeym* would be used, or

perhaps the more standard *sholoyim* (in either case with stress on the first syllable, less formally; and more formally, on the second). In reading from the Torah in synagogue, where the ancient accent marks are followed, the rendition would have to have stress on the last syllable: *sholéym* (deep Lithuanian Hebrew) or *sholóym* (standardized Lithuanian Hebrew). All the cultural intricacy is lost when *shalóm* is used for the whole lot.

This is not a book about the pronunciations of Lithuanian Jews. The linguistic and phonetic history will not be given. They have been traced in the author's "Phonology of Ashkenazic" (in L. Glinert's *Hebrew in Ashkenaz*, Oxford 1993) and "The Lithuanian Standard and the controversies that surround it" (in Yiddish, in *Yivo bleter*, n.s. 2, N.Y. 1994).

What is important in this book is cultural authenticity. Forms of words, names and places are chosen from the repertoire of Lithuanian Jewish

culture, not of Israeli culture (though Israeli equivalents are sometimes added to enable the reader to pursue matters further in various reference works). This means that choices had to be made along the continuum that runs from the most informal Yiddish to the most formal Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic. Occasionally more than one variant is provided.

Where concepts have in effect become English words (for example *Gaon*, *Golem*, *Hasidim*) they are left in their popular English form where the native form is not the point of issue. The name of the Gaon of Vilna (*der Vilner gaon* in Yiddish) was of course *Eylóhu* (*Elijah* in English, *Eliahu* in Israeli Hebrew).

The reader need not be concerned with mastering the nuances of the internal diversity of Lithuanian Jewish pronunciations, but it is an aim of this book to provide their "feel and taste."

Jewish Lithuania

Christian and Jewish scholars alike have recorded the *Stone of Eysishok*, a Jewish gravestone in Eysishok (now Eišiškės), a town some thirty-eight miles south of Vilna (Vilnius). The Jewish calendar year on the stone corresponds with the year 1171. Who knows, maybe the stone will one day be found again — buried, in a foundation wall, in the ballast of a local road, or in the dreams of a traveler passing through.

The beginnings of Lithuanian Jewry are ancient and clouded in many uncertainties. Historians are in any case at the mercy of what happened to survive and what happened to be found. The stone means of course that somebody lived there (or not far from there) before he or she died. Such simple inferences are a necessary part of the enterprise of constructing and reconstructing the early centuries of Lithuanian Jewish history. It is a story of a civilization rising gradually, for generations imperceptibly, over the course of centuries.

The end of Lithuanian Jewry, by contrast, came abruptly as part of the most brutal instance of genocide in human history. Innumerable details of human delight in cruelty are meticulously recorded.

Here “too much” is known for the appetite of the average person. It is a story of racial and religious hate resulting in the murder of nearly all the women, the men and the children of a minority population.

This book is not a history of Lithuanian Jewry. Historical data are provided not as an end, but as a tool to give context and from time to time to help see larger panoramas. *Lithuanian Jewish Culture* is actually an introduction not to one culture but to the various *cultures* of Lithuanian Jews, or Litvaks (Yiddish *Litvakes*). The aim is to provide understanding of the conceptual and spiritual frameworks of each of the cultures of Lithuanian Jewry, as seen through its own eyes, as any culture should be studied (at least as the point of departure). There is absolutely no intention to “boast” about these cultures, or to claim that one of them is somehow better than another, or than any other culture, for that matter. A fine line must be drawn between elucidation of exciting cultural intricacies on the one hand and parochial boasting on the other. The intricacies and details are what make culture worth studying. There is, moreover, nothing wrong with delighting in various traditions without having to necessarily

agree, intellectually, philosophically, theologically or in any other way, with even one word of what it is they are “saying.”

The historic area of Lithuania is the natural territory of Lithuanian Jewish culture. The term *natural territory* is used here, notwithstanding the circumstance that Lithuanian Jewry never aspired to statehood, and the group in question did not by any means originate in Lithuania. What is unique in this heritage did however originate in Lithuania (and neighboring lands), and “where they lived” was the place where that heritage rose, grew and became natural over the centuries. Not as an exclusive territory, but as a minority coexisting with the other peoples of that territory. Not just a minority but a special kind of minority.

The Lithuanian Jewish cultures, like the other European Jewish cultures, are to be counted among the *stateless cultures* of Europe. Their carriers have never aspired to independence, to armies, to navies or to a police force.

The stateless cultures of Europe have sought (beyond such personal concerns as the quality of life) cultural freedom and the right to pursue the continuity of their traditions and beliefs, religious or otherwise, among themselves. In other words, they have sought to be left in peace. Major stateless cultures in the history of Lithuania include the Karaites or Karaim(s); Christian Orthodox Old Believers; Roma (Gypsies) and the European Muslims known as Tatars. Of these the Karaites share a Hebraic and Old Testament heritage with Lithuanian Jewry, though they are a highly distinct people.

The Center for Stateless Cultures was set up at Vilnius University in the last year of the twentieth century. The author was privileged to have been part of this inspiring experiment. In many ways, this book is a direct outgrowth of the Center’s first few years and of its first “child,” the university’s Vilnius Yiddish Institute. By learning about other cultures, one comes better to understand one’s own, and by listening to the provocative questions posed by one’s students, one is forced to reconsider both notions and givens.

To study any culture in a meaningful way, it is vital to dispense with stylish political correctness, and to tell things as they are, or at least as they are seen to be by the society in question. Various aspects of the history of Lithuanian Jewish culture are not particularly popular today with either Lithuanians or Jews. This book means to offend nobody, but it does not shirk from proposing constructions that do not fit current perceptions.

But it must be remembered that the quest here is not for any absolute truth. To the contrary, there are no absolute truths in cultural studies, just the “local truths” of the societies being studied, things accepted at a given time and place. We may begin therefore with some basic definitions, usages, and historical events.

In the study of Lithuanian Jewish culture, the word *Lithuania* does not refer to the territory of the present Republic of Lithuania, nor to that of its predecessor in the period between the world wars. It refers to a land known in Jewish cultural history as *Lita*. This is as good a place as any to illustrate three distinct Lithuanian Jewish tradi-

tions, starting with the very name of the land. In Yiddish it is *Líte* (pronounced LIH-teh), spelled in Jewish script with the letter ayin at the end (for *e*). In traditional rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic, it is *Líto*, with the letter alef at the end (for *o*), though casual pronunciation would follow the Yiddish. In modern Hebrew it is *Líta*, with final hey (for *a*). The same is true for the city now called Vilnius. Prewar Jewish books published here list the place of publication as *Vilno* (traditional Talmudic books), *Vilne* (modern Yiddish books) or *Vilna* (modern Hebrew books).

In the case of the city Grodna, the internal Jewish intricacies are more elaborate. There is the older name, *Horódne* or *Haródne* in Yiddish, which had its traditional Lithuanian Hebrew variant, *Horódno* (well known to scholars from the title pages of Jewish books printed there in the eighteenth and nineteenth century). Then there is the newer Yiddish *Gródne*, with its variants *Gródno* (traditional Lithuanian Hebrew) and *Gródna* (modern Hebrew). It isn't only the Jews, of course, who have had more than one name for one fine city! Among others, there are Belarusian *Hrodna*, Lithuanian *Gardinas*, Polish *Grodno*. Which is correct? They are all correct. Spellings such as *Grodna* (and, Kovna, Riga, Vilna) are, incidentally, used in this book as neutral historic English usage. But the very multiplicity of names, arising from diverse languages and cultures, for one and the same place, is the best sign that the place has been the scene of successful multiculturalism, a point of pride in the history of that place. Intercultural respect and pluralism start

with recognizing that one and the same physical space corresponds with an array of conceptual, linguistic and cultural spaces, all of which are equally legitimate and equally real.

Lita — Jewish Lithuania — stretches from the Baltic Sea in the northwest (modern Lithuania and Latvia); Bialystok (now Poland) and Brisk (now Brest, Belarus) at its southwest; to somewhere near Smolensk (now in the Russian Federation) in the northeast; and, finally, defining an arc for its southern border, touching the Black Sea at a point just east of Odessa (now Ukraine). The approximate territory of Lita in its classical borders (before the later migrations to the Crimean region) is shown on the map on pp. 16-17. A larger version appears as an insert. The place names within the map are given in their Yiddish form, as they were and are used by Litvaks (in a standardized Latin letter transcription explained in the Note on Transcription).

In other words, this culture may be stateless, but it is not landless. There is a definite contiguous territory, whose historic geography can be determined with relative precision (this map continues to be modified based on ongoing expeditions to the “last of the last” survivors in various parts of the territory).

Where do the borders of Jewish Lithuania — of Lita — come from, then? They are close enough to various periods of the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania to demonstrate direct derivation from those earlier times. Allowing for some outward movement over the centuries, these borders are directly derivable from those reached by the

Lithuanian Grand Duke Gedymin (Gediminas) by the time of his death in 1341. See the map on page 19, where the blue line marks the approximate borders of Lita. Historically speaking, Lita is roughly congruent with Gedymin's territory (marked on the map by dark green shading), with some outward expansion into the region conquered by his son Olgierd (Algirdas), who died in 1377.

But the borders of Jewish Lithuania are not arrived at by using Gedymin's Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a "romantic" point of departure. They are set, rather, on the basis of empirical evidence, according to the results of a century of fieldwork by linguists, ethnographers, and other researchers, a project that still continues among the last survivors in the homeland, as well as emigrés abroad. This fieldwork, part of the larger study of Eastern European Jewry, has established (sometimes exactly, often with transitional sectors), where the Jews were Litvaks, and where they were non-Litvaks. And, to tell the truth, this does not (except at the few points of genuinely "mixed dialects") involve anything very complicated. A Litvak can be identified the moment he or she opens his or her mouth and says a couple of words. So distinctive is the dialect of both the spoken language (Yiddish) and the pronunciation of the two ancient sacred languages (Hebrew and Aramaic), that the presence of "Litvakness" is equally evident to the Litvak (or "northerner" within East European Jewry) and the non-Litvak (or "southerner").



But “Litvakness” goes deeper than dialect. In Yiddish, the concept *Litvishkayt* (which translates literally as “Lithuanianness”) invokes a host of associations, values, memories, and attitudes. The last Jew in Suvalk (now Suwałki, Poland), Nokhem-Meyshe Adelson, in his high eighties, recalls his mother telling him as a little boy that he should always have a *gúte Lítvishe harts*, literally: “a good Lithuanian heart.” That is the traditional Lithuanian Jewish sense of the concept “Lithuanianness,” far as it may be from the political correctness of today’s Lithuanians and today’s Jews.

Language does not exist in a vacuum. When two dialects differ radically from each other, the overall differentiation is invariably mirrored in all sorts of other ways, and, in the case at hand, the Litvaks’ culture is found to be distinctive in other areas, among them religion, traditions, folklore, scholarship, dress, architecture and food.

It is one of the curiosities of statelessness that geographic concepts can be *more* durable than for sovereign powers. Grodna, for example, may have belonged to Lithuania, Poland-Lithuania, the Russian Empire, the interwar Polish Republic, the German Third Reich, the Belorussian S.S.R. and now the Republic of Belarus. For Lithuanian Jewish culture, by contrast, the question of “who won the last war” is uniquely irrelevant to the internal world of Jewish culture (though very relevant in terms of the tolerance exhibited to minorities). Within Jewish culture, it is a city in the heart of *Lita*, and that’s all there is to it.

The “conceptual stability” of places for a stateless culture, in sharp distinction to the “who controls the place militarily” measure of the nation-states, is but one of the “strengths of weakness.” Stateless cultures inherently have no interest in being the boss or owner of the place. Their concern is to be left alone, to be one of the happily coexisting minorities.

There is another grand irony. Lithuanian Yiddish, the dialect of Yiddish popularly called *Lítvish* (“Lithuanian”), is the only language to have ever been spoken throughout *any* phase of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Lithuanian language, one of the most ancient and enthralling in the world, was and is of course the native language of the population of ethnic Lithuanians, in the Grand Duchy’s westernmost reaches.

And this takes us to the delicate but vital question of “Lithuanianness” in the various senses of the word. The definition provided by nineteenth century nationalism and its successor models would perhaps restrict things to ethnic Lithuanians whose native vernacular is the Lithuanian language.

But the claim to fame of the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania goes way beyond its military prowess, such impressive victories as the 1410 Battle of Tannenberg (over the Prussians) notwithstanding. The Grand Duchy was way ahead of its time on an issue infinitely more important than military might. Weapons are cheap but humanism is rare on the pyre of history. And that issue rounds precisely on the question of *Grand-Duchy-Lithuanianness* in its classic sense.

**Grand Duchy of Lithuania (13th–16th centuries)
 Compared with
 Jewish Lithuania (*Lita/Lite*) in Modern Times**
 Scale 1: 14,000,000



Many centuries before the eighteenth century “Rights of Man” philosophers and the nation-states founded (or reformed) on their principles, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania built a multicultural empire that became a land of refuge for persecuted peoples from various parts of Europe and beyond.

It was a multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual empire that was, with various setbacks, tolerant of the wide variety of ethnicities, cultures and languages that inhabited its lands. “Tolerant” is perhaps too weak a word because tolerance implies only that the Other is left alone, “tolerated.” The Grand Duchy made what we would today call multiculturalism an explicit principle. The most famous expression of that principle concerning the Jews are the Charters of Witold the Great (Vytautas, Vitovt) of 1388 (for Troki and Brest) and 1389 (for Grodna). In collective Lithuanian Jewish memory he acquired the title *der Litvisher Kéyresh* (“The Lithuanian Cyrus”), a proud reference to the biblical emperor of Persia who permitted the ancient Judeans, exiled from their land by the Babylonians in 586 BC, to return and continue in peace to adhere to their beliefs and traditions, and to rebuild their civilization (recounted in the Book of Ezra). This is no mean title, coming from an ancient people, whose “speciality” is a long memory. All the more so in view of the famous section from the book of Isaiah that starts with the words: “Thus saith the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have beholden, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the loins of kings; to open the doors

before him, and that the gates may not be shut” (Isaiah 45: 1).

Witold’s 1388 charter closely follows the privileges issued by Polish rulers, most famously Boleslav the Pious, Duke of Kalish, whose charter was issued in 1264, and extended to all of Poland by Kazimir the Great in 1334. Alas, the proclamations of Gedymin, presumably issued around the time of the founding of Vilna in 1323, have been lost, and his welcome to Jews to settle in his new capital remain largely in the realm of tradition.

The following points are included among the thirty-seven sections of Witold’s 1388 charter: A Jew cannot be convicted on the testimony of a Christian alone; there need to be two witnesses, a Christian and a Jew (§1); a Jew may travel without hindrance within the country, and when carrying merchandise must pay the same customs duties as others (§12); a Christian damaging a Jewish cemetery shall be punished (§14); in important cases requiring an oath, a Jew may swear on the Old Testament (§19); in cases concerning Jews the court is to sit in the synagogue or in a place chosen by the Jews (§23); return of pawned property cannot be demanded on Jewish holy days (§29); a Christian neighbor who fails to respond to a call for help at night from his Jewish neighbor shall pay a fine (§36); Jews may buy and sell on the same basis as Christians (§37).

This is more than a charter of equal rights among individuals of the majority and minority. The language is of course not the language of today, but the ideas are strikingly modern. Going beyond toleration of the “existence” of a minority

that is a victim of much prejudice, and promulgating equality before the law, the charter, like its earlier Polish prototypes, recognizes that minorities in danger of prejudice and violence need that *extra* measure of legal protection which is so graciously provided (the genre of protections subsumed under the concept “affirmative action” in the very different circumstances of the twentieth century and beyond).

This, like the Polish charters, came while much of western Europe was sinking in racial hatred and genocide. The First Crusade in 1096 was the symbolic harbinger of centuries of mass murder and expulsions, particularly in German towns and cities. The atrocities included the Rindfleisch massacres of 1298, the violence resulting from accusations of culpability in the Black Plague which struck central Europe in 1348 and 1349, and numerous local outrages, including not infrequent instances of individual Jews and entire Jewish communities being burned alive for refusing to accept Jesus Christ and on the age old charge of deicide.

For modern cultural historians it is however Witold’s charter of the following year, issued to the Jews of Grodna on June 18th 1389, that speaks most clearly for the special values of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This is its text:

In the name of God, Amen.

If the affairs of people are not confirmed by witnesses and put in writing, they are quickly forgotten.

Therefore we, Alexander, or Witold, by the grace of God, Prince of Lithuania, and heir to Grodna and Brest,

Dorogitz, Lutsk, Vladimir, and other lands, affirm for the knowledge of the present people and for the people of future generations, whose knowledge this document will reach, the granting of rights and freedoms for the Jews of Grodna, for them as well as for their descendants in future generations, as follows:

To live in the areas where they live in Grodna, that is: starting from the bridge of the Castle of Grodna to the market, on both sides of the street, to the street which goes from Castle Street to Podol; on the areas facing the church houses and the house of Ivanovsky, from the other side of the street up to the cemetery, and across the cemetery to the lot of the Church even up to the very river, the Gorodnitza. And, near the castle up to the Little Church; on the sites near the river Gorodnitza where the Jewish prayerhouse stands; up to their cemetery, where they bury their dead, up to the Jewish area by the Gorodnitza up to the small river Gorodnitza and right up to the plot of Pan Ivan Fyodorovich, and across from it, all of the other side, up to the small street and up to the lot of the Church.

From that cemetery to the present one, lands purchased for it in the future, and likewise lands purchased in the future for the sites of Jewish prayerhouses, shall not be taxed and no levy shall be paid to our treasury on account of them.

They are permitted to engage in whatever activity they please in their homes; and to sell and to serve all sorts of drinks, whether homemade or imported, with tax paid to the state once a year; to buy and sell at the market, and in the stalls, and on the streets; they can do these equal to the burghers, and likewise they may engage in all crafts.

Jewish butchers may sell, to whomever they wish, meat cut into pieces, quartered, or by the slice, in the market or in the stalls, this being free of taxes, levies and duties.

We permit them to own lands for plowing and for hay, those they own today and the land that they will purchase in the future, equal to the burghers, exploitable and with tax paid to our treasury.

And all other rights and freedoms accorded by us to the Jews of Brest in 1388 are assigned to the Jews of Grodna.

All these abovementioned matters are hereby affirmed everlastingly and for the centuries by this, our Charter, and granted to them in the presence of the noblemen listed below, and confirmed by our seal.

In Lutsk on the eve of John the Baptist Day, June 13th in the year 1389 of the birth of Christ, third indict [of the Byzantine cycle], in the presence of honored noblemen: Prince Fyodor presently Voevoda of Lutsk; Rimon and Zhygimont, knights of Lithuania; also Minkgailo of Oshmeny, which is in Lithuania, and in the presence of many trustworthy noblemen.

The three sensational concepts in this fourteenth century document are equality of people (“equal to the town’s burghers”), land ownership, and the permanence of equal rights (“everlastingly”). In terms of facts, we see a minority community whose people live in a choice part of the city center, owning their own homes and businesses, trading on an equal basis with the rest of the city’s residents, with rights guaranteed in perpetuity.

To dispense once again with political correctness, it is more than likely that one of the prime factors of the Jewish “feel-good” factor in Lithuania was — paganism. Many residues of

paganism were of course prevalent long after the (as Europe goes) late conversion to Christianity of Lithuania’s rulers (in 1387). Truth to be told, most of the major religions have gone through periods of bloody tyranny and intolerance (witness the historical books of the Old Testament, the medieval and not so medieval Church, certain branches of Islam, and many others). Paganism inherently implies at least more potential for tolerance toward the faith of an Other, and on the tolerance scales of history, it may therefore be much closer to modern notions of human rights and freedoms than all of the great established religions.

The spirit of the charters and the society from which they emerged was preserved for many centuries by enlightened rulers of Lithuania. That spirit did much to create the necessary conditions for the rise of the various Lithuanian Jewish cultures, and the eventual ascent of Vilna to the status of *Jerusalem of Lithuania*.

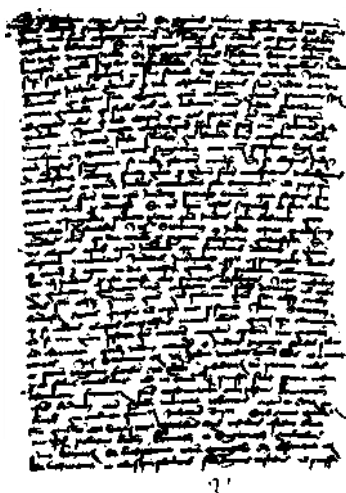


The great Lithuanian writer Tomas Venclova has noted more than once that it is the most bitter of betrayals that the Holocaust in Lithuania was unleashed in Kaunas (Kovna) on June 27th 1941 by the Lietukis Garage massacre of peaceful, unarmed Jewish civilians, citizens of Lithuania, on a street named *Vytauto* for Grand Duke Vytautas (Witold).

On the eve of World War II, there were, by the estimate of Yitzhak Arad, the eminent

The Charter of Witold (Vytautas) the Great

The original charters of Witold (Vytautas) the Great, Grand Duke of Lithuania, granting the Jews rights in Troki and Brest (1388) and in Grodna (1389) have been lost, but fifteenth and sixteenth century copies survive in three languages.



Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum of Lithuania

In Old Belarusian (the language of Witold's court)



Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum of Lithuania

In Latin



Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum of Lithuania

In Polish

historian of the Holocaust in Lithuania, a million and a half Litvaks living in their historic territory, distributed among Lithuania, Latvia, northeastern Poland, the Belorussian Soviet republic and some adjacent areas of the western Russian and northern Ukrainian republics. Over ninety percent of them were killed by the Nazis and their eager local collaborators for the one sin of “being Jewish,” largely bringing to an unthinkable end a vibrant and variegated civilization. Still, its survivors and emigrés and some of their descendants have managed to strike roots in different corners of the world, and small communities of survivors do their best to carry on in the original homelands. Modern democratic Lithuania has proved particularly conducive to the concentrated work of its small Jewish community and to the increasing number of visitors who have taken to seeking out their roots. Those scions of Lithuanian Jewish families in the west who are now looking into where it is their people come from are not seldom shocked by the magnitude of what they discover.

There are levels of cultural productivity that just cannot emerge from individuals or from groups with vague notions of separate identity,

levels that can only result from the thick of a genuine civilization. That notion, *civilization*, comes into play when a certain critical mass of people, communities, areas, and daily institutions thrive in sufficiently compact settlement. In the history of Lithuanian Jewish culture, that *feel* did not go unnoticed. In his 1899 *Journey through Lithuania*, Nahum Slouschz, writing in Hebrew, commented: “We are in the Jewish country, perhaps the only Jewish country in the world.”

Slouschz was looking at things from the Jewish point of view. A glimpse at the entire Lithuanian scene by an outsider from earlier times can be more revealing. The French-Belgian diplomat Guilbert de Lannoy (1386—1462), after his visit to Troki (now Trakai), near Vilna, wrote in 1414 that the town’s dwellers include “Germans, Lithuanians and many Jews, and they all have their own languages.” That sums it up. A Grand Duchy of sundry peoples able to build their own culture, living alongside each other in peace, each with its own language in the symphony of sounds and thoughts, each proud to call itself, in its own language, *Lithuanian*.

Chapter 2

The Ancient Heritage

To understand the traditional Lithuanian Jews — the Litvaks — or for that matter, any traditional Jewish community anywhere in the world, it is necessary to go back close to four thousand years. The reason for that is, simply, that this is a civilization for which a conceptually unilinear *past* was (and in traditional Jewish communities around the world, still is) vastly more important than anything happening during the lifetime of any of us. The great historian of the Yiddish language, Max Weinreich (1894—1969), who built the Yivo, the world's first university-level Yiddish institute, in interwar Vilna, explained it in terms of *vertical* as opposed to *horizontal* authority (or legitimization). Or to sum it up more simply: what God said then-and-there on Mount Sinai to Moses, as interpreted by thousands of years of unassailable rabbinic research and discovery, covers every aspect of present and future life right up to infinity. In the terms of evolved Jewish belief, that means the advent of Messiah. What some trendy culture says and does today counts for very little in that bigger scheme of things.

The condensed time and space line (page 26) cannot of course do justice to the complexi-

ties of a four thousand year old heritage. But it can help in grasping the ongoing dynamic, the continuity of history, belief and tradition, in juxtaposition with the radical changes in geography and regional history. For the traditional “people of the Book,” the Jews, “what it says in the Book” has remained the constant, although slowly but surely, interpretations and reinterpretations have enabled it to adapt, from the deserts of the Near East to the contemporary traditional Jewish communities around the world.

The term *traditional* here corresponds in various ways with such notions as: religious, observant, orthodox, ultra-orthodox. All of Jewish history, from the cultural point of view, can be seen as an unbroken continuum of that traditionality, punctuated by “secular outbursts” at frequent or infrequent points of time. Some of those secularistic episodes have been magnificently creative, giving rise to mind-boggling syntheses of ancient Judaism and the non-Jewish culture of the time and place. Prominent examples include Hellenistic Judaism in the Greek Period in Palestine and Egypt, from the fourth century BC onward; the

rise of Hebrew poetry and philology in medieval Spain; and, in the last two centuries, the splendid achievements of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature, both of which arose in Eastern Europe (and in considerable measure, in Lithuania).

Lithuanian Jewish Culture will attempt to do justice to the mainstream tradition and its salient internal variations, as well as to the secular outbursts which fashioned the new forms of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe. With the focus on Jewish Lithuania —Lita— the attempt will be made to present each of the Lithuanian Jewish cultures through its own eyes.

The traditional (“religious”) culture is the oldest, the one characteristic of Lithuanian Jewry from its beginnings to the present, and the one from which all the others sprang forth. The idea is to present the various Lithuanian Jewish cultures both separately and in relation (and reaction!) to the traditional culture against which they rebelled in some sense.

Every little boy and girl in this traditional society has a clear vision of “our universal history” that goes back to Genesis. God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Generations later, God commanded Abraham, of a town called Ur of the Chaldees in Babylonia to pack up and migrate to the Land of Canaan, which God promised to Abraham’s descendants. God made a covenant with Abraham (marked by circumcision). According to the covenant all Jews reject all idols and image-gods, and believe in a single God, who made the heavens and the earth, and of course, the covenant.

Abraham’s grandson Jacob (or Israel) became the father of twelve sons whose clans developed into the twelve tribes. The tribes migrated to Egypt, where they grew dramatically in number, and were enslaved by the Pharaohs. Finally, after four centuries of bondage, they were led to freedom, after a bitter campaign of liberation, by Moses, with “a little help from above” in the form of: the Ten Plagues visited upon the ancient Egyptians; the splitting of the Red Sea (or Sea of Reeds) for the great escape; and other miracles. Moses then took them through the desert over forty years, during which time they received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.

Moses did not live to enter the Promised Land, but his successor Joshua conquered Canaan. After a period of Judges, the people of Israel wanted a king, and the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first. After his tragic death in battle, David, who made his name by slaying Goliath with a slingshot, and was God’s chosen through the word of his prophet Samuel, became king and founder of a dynasty, around 1000 BC. David’s son Solomon inherited the kingdom.

After Solomon’s death, however, the northern ten tribes revolted against Solomon’s son Rehoboam. They were led by Jeroboam ben Nebat, whom the Bible condemns as leading his people back to the worship of idols. Jeroboam’s northern kingdom became known as the Kingdom of Israel (or Samaria). There were frequent coups with a lot of bloodshed, until 722 BC, when Israel was conquered by Assyria (Ashur). As was the prevailing custom, the conquerors exiled the

vanquished so they would assimilate and lose their identity. The northern kingdom's defeated people became the Ten Lost Tribes, who were so "lost and gone forever" that every kind of legend persists to this day about their fate.

The southern kingdom, Judah (later known as Judea), by contrast, for all its own turmoil, was ruled throughout by David's direct descendants right through to 586 BC, when it fell to the Babylonians (who had in the meantime conquered the Assyrians). The two tribes of the south, Judah and Benjamin, and the three ancient castes (*Kohen* or priest, *Levi* or Levite, and *Israel* or simple Israelite) have survived right up to the present day. Traditional Jews have family traditions, that come down the male line, that tell them how to be called up to bless the Torah in the synagogue, whether as (in the Yiddish forms of these terms) *Kóyhen*, *Lévi* or as *Yisróel*. Whether one is Jewish or not, on the other hand, comes from the mother rather than the father.

But to return to the received version of Jewish history as it has remained alive for each generation, the Babylonians were themselves conquered by the Persians. The Persian kings Cyrus and Darius allowed the Judeans to return to Judah and rebuild Solomon's temple (which the Babylonians had destroyed around 586). The narrative of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) ends pretty much in this period, taking the story from the traditional epoch of creation, through to the patriarchs, Egypt, return, Judges, Kings, exile and return. From the eighth century BC onward, if not earlier, the prophets were producing a doc-

trine of human ethics and social justice that complemented the harsher early legal code of the Five Books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy). They did so largely in the genre of inspired poetry.

At some stage, the Old Testament underwent a process of canonization which means, in practical terms, a cut-off point. It was after that point that the Greeks defeated the Persians (who had defeated the Babylonians who had defeated the Assyrians). The Greeks were of course themselves defeated by the Romans. It was in the Roman period, around the time of Christ, that Judaism underwent major changes (some of which were simmering long beforehand). Elements of what would become both modern Judaism and Christianity were crystallizing in segments of the Judean community, some mainstream, some in sects, most famously (though not exclusively) among the Judean desert sects whose best known legacy is the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947. This "new theology" posited Messiah as a sort of individual, in some sense, who would — and there are many variations of this — come and save God's people and/or the entire world. As Christianity was to develop, Messiah came and will return; in Judaism he has yet to come. So much blood has been spilled over such differences that would, to a reasonable outsider seem rather minor, but such is the nature of history when "Only We Have God's Honest Truth" religions come to political power.

In both Judaism and Christianity, Messiah is a direct descendant of King David, "from the

seed of Jesse” (David’s father), and in this sense, his dynasty will never die. In Judaism, his coming will be the culmination of all human suffering, and in most versions, it will be heralded by the reappearance of Elijah the Prophet. The Yiddish word for Messiah, *meshiekh*, derived from the same ancient Hebrew word, meaning “anointed one,” behaves grammatically like a personal name, enabling one to feel close to the future redeemer, just as close perhaps as to the figures of the Old Testament and the great scholars of many generations ago.

One incident is a symbolic dividing line between older Biblical-type Judaism with its animal sacrifices, and the new Judaism, with its belief in Messiah and the world to come, and the emphasis on Torah scholarship here in this world. It is the story of Johanan ben Zakkai. When it became obvious to this first century AD scholar that Jerusalem would soon fall, he had himself smuggled out in a coffin, so the story goes, and brought before the Roman commander Vespasian around 68 AD (Jerusalem fell in 70). Johanan asked Vespasian to allow him to live in peace in the village Yavne so he and his students could sit and study Torah, and threaten no one. The request was granted and Torah scholarship, according to the tradition, therefore continued apace, from Yavne, and uninterrupted, onward to the present day.

Torah scholarship — or even just “Torah” (or Oral Torah) for short, in an elliptic sense — is a broad term, referring to intellectual immersion in the Torah. In its most literal meaning the word (from a Hebrew root for “teaching”), refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis,

Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. During the new period, the belief that these five books (and not just the Ten Commandments) were given by God at Sinai, became “standard Judaism.” What followed from this was the belief that all questions about every aspect of life can be answered by wise and inspired interpretation of every passage, every word, every letter, every dot of the Torah.

The traditional Torah scroll is written by a highly learned scribe according to meticulously prescribed ancient laws, and it is the most sacred object in Judaism (see p. 177). The notion of *Torah* was gradually expanded beyond the text and beyond the scroll, to cover the ongoing process of rabbinic interpretation and codification of Jewish law based upon it. The belief system that evolved entailed certainty about the Torah’s direct divinity, and (this is the crux) the accompanying notion that study of the Torah (in the wider sense) is the highest mission and endeavor of the Jewish people. With the advent of a growing body of scholarly literature using sophisticated logical and textual tools to derive its knowledge from the given text of the Five Books, it was not long before immersion in all of this became the “stuff of scholarship” for the society in question. In areas of religious law and daily life, the conclusions reached by the new stateless authority — the community of rabbinic scholars — were and are binding upon all the believing members of the Jewish people, which until modern times meant close to everybody.

To get just a taste of the intellectual methodology involved, it might be best to simply cite

in translation the thirteen principles for legal analysis of the Torah which were codified by Rabbi Yishmoel (Ishmael ben Elisha) in the first half of the second century AD):

- 1 *a fortiori* argument (if x is true then all the *more* is y true);
- 2 analogy between similar texts;
- 3 derivation of a principle from one or from two "premise" texts;
- 4 limitation of applicability when a general principle is followed by specific cases (to those cases);
- 5 widening of applicability when specific cases are followed by a general principle (beyond those cases);
- 6 widening of applicability (but only within the relevant category) when the sequence general-specific-general is encountered;
- 7 interdependency of the general and the specific;
- 8 wider applicability where a specific case is highlighted among the examples of a generality;
- 9 application of leniency where specific instances of a general rule are singled out (when their features are similar to the general rule);
- 10 application of leniency or stringency where specific instances of a general rule are singled out (when their features are dissimilar to the general rule);
- 11 nullification of a general principle in an instance which is highlighted for its own treatment;
- 12 derivation of meaning or intent from context;
- 13 two passages contradicting each other, to be reconciled by recourse to a third.

For modern non-believers, the entire system can fall down at many points because of the potentially subjective nature of selection of principles and their potentially arbitrary applicability

to certain passages in the Torah. And it can fall down, most spectacularly where the final principle is invoked because that's the one that allows a shrewd operator to resolve all contradictions in the ancient books with casuistic glibness. For believers, by contrast, there is no problem because of the immense esteem in which genuine Torah scholars are held, because of the divine inspiration they are believed to be enjoying, and because of the overall humility of the bona fide Torah scholar who would rarely dare rule against a wide body of opinion that evolved over many centuries. It is somewhat analogous to the way people in modern societies have faith in the common sense of their judiciary as a body to interpret and apply the law within a rational, long standing and accepted tradition. The trust in the judiciary, lapses notwithstanding, and confidence in the tradition and the system render inconsequential any fear of "wild individual interpretations running amok."

It is little wonder that close to two thousand years of intensive use of these and other Talmudic principles (sometimes called Talmudic hermeneutics nowadays) have produced a system of higher education stressing memory (of "points made" as well as the exact pages on which they occur in a wide corpus of texts), mental acuity, and logical interrelationships. All of these principles comprise a synthesis between, on the one hand, logical and legal thinking for its own sake (no doubt influenced by the ancient Greeks and others), and, on the other, the application of the lot of them strictly within the *belief* that the Torah is God-given and sacred, and all must derive from

it. In other words there is one premise that results from belief, after which there is enormous intellectual freedom to explore, theorize and challenge earlier views.

Some areas of the new Judaism that was codified in those first centuries of the common era would continue to affect the everyday life of traditional, religious Jews in perpetuity (and in most generations, they are the vast majority). The religious Jew observes strict dietary laws, observes the traditional lunar (actually “lunisolar”) calendar and its many holy days; adheres to laws of monthly sexual abstention; a strict code of ethics and morals. The male must, after the age of majority (thirteen), pray three times a day, recite a multitude of blessings before most of the pleasures of life, and fulfill many additional commandments.

In fact, the rabbis of that period — the early first millennium of the common era — and beyond, managed to extract 613 commandments from the Torah, divided into 365 *thou-shalt-nots* (“negative precepts”) and 248 *thou-shalts* (“positive precepts”). This is a rather elaborate development from the state of affairs in the Bible itself, read literally, where God is reported to have given Moses two tablets with *ten* commandments.

Many of the laws debated were not (and outside Israel cannot be) “real” in daily life. All those relating to the temple in Jerusalem are theoretical as long as there is no temple in Jerusalem (it stood on the site of the present Al Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount). All those relating to sovereignty, police, armies, and so forth were equally non-applicable. In fact Jews are commanded to

complete loyalty to the nation-states in which they find themselves, and are obliged to obey that civil law first and foremost. This principle, which overrides many others, is known in Aramaic as *díno d'malkhúso díno* (“The law of the government is the law”).

A major innovation of the new Judaism involved the introduction of an *explicit* concept of Afterlife (the World to Come). An afterlife can only be “read into” the Hebrew Bible by the kind of Biblical interpretation known as exegesis. There have been such explanations, for example, of the Chariot of Fire which took the Prophet Elijah to Heaven in a whirlwind (II Kings 2: 11); of Ezekiel’s vision of living breath coming to the Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37: 10); of the passage in Daniel saying that many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake (Daniel 12: 2).

But within rabbinic Judaism, it was important for the afterlife to come from the Torah — the first five books or Pentateuch itself — rather than just the later books. Some rabbinic scholars derived it from the phrase “all the days of thy life” (Deuteronomy 16: 3), which they interpreted as referring to “this world” as well as to a messianic era when the dead will be resurrected. The passage “Ye stand this day all of you before the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 29: 10) was likewise interpreted as referring to a future raising of the dead. It is a case of the later Judaism seeking legitimization by claims that its ideas *are* contained in the Torah. Over thousands of years this “Messiah” has in fact evolved into a very intimate figure.

Three major works were completed by the middle of the first millennium. Around the year 200, the Mishna was completed. It is divided into six orders which are further divided into tractates or books. The six orders are: *Plantings* (agriculture — eleven books); *Festivals* (twelve books); *Women* (laws of marriage, divorce, sex — seven books); *Damages* (civil law — ten books); *Sanctities* (Temple, sacrifices, dietary laws — eleven books); *Purities* (ritual and general cleanliness of people and homes — twelve books). In addition to the canon of the Mishna, many legalistic discussions from the same period survive in external texts, or *Braitas* (“Externals” in Aramaic), which were collected into compilations called *Toseftas* (“Additions”).

Although second in authority only to the Torah itself, the Mishna did not become “a last word.” On the contrary, it became itself the basis for further interpretation and commentary, and was, retrospectively considered, just another major link in an eternal chain of Torah study in that wider sense, a renewed religion that has survived all the ancient conquerors of the Land of Israel — Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. It is all a story of how a defeated ancient nation succeeded in reinventing (recycling?) itself as a stateless culture “in for the long haul” in spite of what would become a seemingly endless list of persecutions, often inspired by an intolerant mainstream of Christianity that came to political and military power, and that could never forgive the Jews for failing to accept the divinity of Jesus Christ (the Jew!), for believing that Messiah has

yet to come for the first time, and, following the New Testament accounts, for the alleged Jewish complicity in the death of Christ. That charge of deicide has cumulatively and by chain reaction caused the murder of millions of Jewish civilians over the ages.

The next great links were the Jerusalem Talmud, completed in Palestine around 400 AD, and a second Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud (which has remained much more popular and authoritative), completed around 500 AD. The word *Talmud* is used in two different senses. It can refer to the Mishna plus the later compendia, or more narrowly, to the later works alone. More precisely, these later compendia, of Jerusalem and Babylonia, comprise the *Gemora* (*Gemara*). The Mishna is in Hebrew. The *Gemora*, of both Talmuds, is in Jewish Aramaic, a language that had supplanted Hebrew as spoken Jewish language centuries earlier. The Babylonian Talmud is usually considered to comprise sixty-three tractates (plus some seven minor works appended later); the Jerusalem Talmud has thirty-nine tractates (by most counts), but it is known that substantial parts have been lost. A popular name for the Talmud is the *Shas*, a Hebrew acronym deriving from the words for “six orders” (the six divisions of the Mishna and *Gemora*, in other words of the Talmud).

A typical first page of a chapter of Talmud has one small paragraph of Mishna in Hebrew followed by many pages of *Gemora* in Aramaic. The spirit of the Talmud (especially the *Gemora*) is one of free and open debate (on anything and everything except the one “untouchable,” the divinity of the

Torah). The good student is one who challenges his teacher (this could be a personal teacher or even a Talmudic authority who lived generations beforehand), comes up with new solutions, new approaches, and above all, new questions. Intellectual acuity is valued above finding the “right answer” (another luxury for stateless cultures where much of the law may remain “theoretical”). Many Talmudic discussions end with the word *téyku* which is popularly defined to mean that the ruling on which views are right and wrong will have to wait until the Prophet Elijah returns to herald the messianic age. The notion that Jews enjoy intellectual argument for its own sake is a stereotype like any other but it nevertheless has deep roots in the ancient and continuous Jewish intellectual tradition.

While much of both Talmuds is concerned with Jewish law or *halókhe*, as it is rendered in Yiddish (*halókho* in Ashkenazic and *halakhá* in modern Hebrew), an important secondary place is assumed by *agóde* (*agódo*, *agadá*) or homiletics, the telling of stories, legends, tales, often with Biblical material and usually with some moral, spiritual or legal implication (not seldom an original explanation of a hard to grasp law).

During the centuries that followed the completion of the two Talmuds, Jewish intellectual life was centered in the great yeshivas (academies) of Babylonia (mostly on the territory of modern Iraq), in the towns Suro (Sura), Pumbedisa (Al-Pumbedita; Al-Anbar), and Ncherdo (Nehardea).

The later first millennium of the common era is largely a quieter period in Jewish history. It was a period of (retrospectively speaking) transi-

tion to the third major period of Jewish history: the *European period*. The rise of Islam and its rapid spread throughout the Near East had two major effects. First, it helped speed the decline of the Babylonian centers. Second, it made way for the rise of the first major new Jewish culture in Europe on the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), known as *Sepharad* (*Sefarad*, *Sefarad*, *Sfard* and other variants).

The victory of the Moors in Spain in 711 made way for the subsequent rise of Sepharad to the status of a great new center of Jewish creativity that was deeply influenced by the most sophisticated Arabic culture, and that was rather less steeped in Talmud. This may be regarded in part as a “secular outburst.” In the Golden Age of Sepharad, from the tenth to the thirteenth century, the *Sephardim*, as the Jews of Sepharad are called, produced great works of philology, poetry, and philosophy. Many of these works were in Hebrew, and some in Jewish Arabic (Judeo-Arabic). Among the best known luminaries were the philologists Joseph Qimhi (± 1105 — ± 1170) and his son David Qimhi (± 1160 — ± 1235); the poet Judah Halevi (± 1075 —1141), and the philosopher and physician Maimonides (1135—1204), who is known among Jews as the *Rámbam* (an acronym of his full Hebrew name containing the patronymic *ben* meaning “son of” — *Rabeynu Moshe ben Maimon* “our teacher Moses son of Maimon”). He was also a great Talmudist. He collected as many conclusions (in other words, actual laws) as he could from the Talmud and the by then extensive literature written about it, decided

many open questions himself, and produced a major new compendium of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah* (in Hebrew). It is divided into fourteen books which do not follow the ordering of the Talmud. Instead, Maimonides used his own logical principles of classification. And, he used logical principles to codify virtually all of Judaism, not only its jurisprudence, applying these principles to the codification of the Jewish religion (including the postbiblical theology of the future Messiah and the world to come). As much as this work is rooted in firm belief, his major philosophic work, *Guide for the Perplexed* (in Jewish Arabic) is rooted in the spirit of the unbridled liberty of the philosopher. Readers to this day often wonder at the disparate voices he adopted to suit each work.

Jewish Mysticism, or *Kabbalah*, also flourished in the Jewish Golden Age of Spain. Its central work, the *Zohar* (or *Book of Splendor*), written in Aramaic, is thought by modern scholars to have been written there by Moshe de Leon (and his circle) in the late thirteenth century. Traditionalists, however, ascribe its authorship to Shimon bar Yochai, a second century Mishna-era scholar. There is room for combining both views in so far as the Sephardic masters compiled the book using many older and in fact ancient traditions and texts. The Kabbalah delves into the mysteries of creation, God, the world, the universe, eternity and much more. Much of it is organized according to the weekly portions into which the books of the Torah are traditionally divided.

Sepharad, on the Iberian Peninsula, was not the only new European Jewish culture to arise

in the centuries whose “chronological center of convenience” (in retrospect) is the year 1000. Other new European Jewish communities were arising around the same time. In no case is it possible, or even desirable, to “date” a community’s origin, as such origins are of necessity evolutionary processes open at each stage, looking back, to diverse interpretation. That is why round numbers are so handy, as long as their “roundness” is kept in mind.

It is symbolic of the traditional Jewish way of thinking, and characteristic of the linguistic playfulness that became traditional, that each community actually “recycled” a more or less obscure Biblical name to refer to — itself. The book of one of the twelve Minor Prophets, Obadiah, contains the passage: “And the captivity of this host of the Children of Israel shall possess that of the Canaanites, even unto *Zarephath*; and the captivity of Jerusalem, which is in *Sepharad*, shall possess the cities of the south” (Obadiah 1: 20). Phonetic similarity with medieval versions of the words “France” and “Spain” are the best explanation for the recycling of *Zarephath* (*Torfis*, *Tarefat*), and *Sepharad* for the French and Spanish territories, respectively. The same is true of the application of *Hogor* (*Hagar*), Abraham’s concubine and the mother of Ishmael, to — Hungary. Phonetic similarity and linguistic playfulness made way for the reapplication to a European territory.

In the case of *Yovon* (*Yavan*) for Greece, the meaning is ancient and literal. That *Knaan* (*Canaan*) became the name for the Slavic territories in the east is easily derivable from the Biblical

curse: "And he [Noah] said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren'" (Genesis 9: 25). The interrelatedness of the words for *Slav* and *slave* are documented in various European languages owing to the medieval slave trade.

And, it was the new European Jewish civilization on the Germanic speaking territories of central Europe that turned out to be the link in the chain between the ancient Jewish past of the Near East and the later Jewish culture of Poland and Lithuania.

In the genealogy of nations provided after the flood epic in Genesis, Ashkenaz appears as the first son of Gomer, who was son of Japheth, one of the three sons of Noah (Genesis 10: 1—3).

Each of the sons of Noah is identified as father of a part of the human race: Shem of the Semites (in other words Shem-ites); Ham, of the African peoples, and Japheth of the Indo-Europeans. There is moreover mention of a *place* called "Ashkenaz" in one of the prophecies of Jeremiah against Babylonia (Jeremiah 51:27).

In its later, recycled, European sense, Ashkenaz came to mean the Germanic speaking lands of central Europe, and its Jews were called the *Ashkenazim* (singular: *Ashkenazi*, which became a family name in later times). It was they who migrated eastward to Poland and Lithuania. Our next link then, in the four thousand year old story "Babylonia to Lithuania" takes us to — Ashkenaz.

Chapter 3

Ashkenaz

Although there were Jewish communities in the Germanic area of Europe in the fourth century, if not earlier, the records (and the traditions) of the continuously settled communities that came to be known as Ashkenaz date from the tenth century, as far as unambiguous sources go. The evidence points to derivation from the Jewish communities in Palestine and Babylonia, whether direct or by way of intermediate communities. It must be remembered, however, that all models of unilinear or “pure” racial descent are inherently flawed, and like all other people, the Ashkenazim no doubt hail from other sources too.

Unlike Sepharad in the Hispanic speaking area, the Ashkenazim did not generally reach for philosophy, philology, or poetry (with the important exception of liturgical poetry). They did not tend to cultural interaction with the Christian surroundings in the spirit in which Sephardic Jewry interacted with Arabic culture (and the differing degrees of tolerance coming from the majority clearly played a major role in that). They were, by contrast, an inward looking society steeped in the ancient heritage of Torah study, looking back in

time to the giving of the Torah and forward in time to the coming of Messiah. The present was somehow less important, a kind of “way station” between those two conceptual events that stand at polaric ends of the “conceptual present” in the hearts and minds of the people who populate this civilization.

It happens not seldom in history that one center of a culture goes under and another rises. Around the year 1000, the rabbinic authority of Babylonia, the “Gaonate” (office of the chief rabbinic authority or Gaon of Babylonian Jewry) was approaching its end. The last consequential holders of the title were Sherira, who died in 1006, and his son Hai, who died in 1038. The institution was abolished altogether a few years later, symbolically bringing to an end the long Near Eastern period in Jewish History.

The chain of rabbinic legal authority passed in good measure to Ashkenaz. The best known early communities were Speyer, Worms and Mainz in the Rhineland. They are known as the *Shum* communities, an acronym deriving from the Jewish names of these three cities (Shpiro,

from which the old Jewish name “Shapiro” derives; Vermayze; and Magentse). There were also early Ashkenazic communities more to the east, in the Danube region, among them Regensburg and Prague.

The new rabbinic authority on the Rhine was established by Gershom ben (\equiv son of) Yehude (Judah), who lived approximately from 960 to 1028. Known as Rabeynu Gershom Mc’or ha-Goylo (our master Gershom, Light of the Exile), he established the first major yeshiva (rabbinical academy) in Europe, thereby shifting the source of Torah authority away from Babylonia and right into central Europe. Instead of sending questions on rabbinic law to Babylonian authorities, questions were now sent to him.

Rabeynu Gershom issued legal edicts or *takónes* as they are known in Yiddish (*takonoyes* in Ashkenazic Hebrew, *takanót* in modern Hebrew). The most famous forbids polygamy (which was after all very popular in the days of the Hebrew Bible). Modern scholars do not think that the early Jews in Ashkenaz were particularly prone to polygamy. Instead, they see in Gershom’s act a symbolic accommodation to western (Christian) society, and a severing of the active legal remnants (laws potentially still applicable) of near eastern societies. The Jewish communities were, so to speak, joining a European civilization.

Another famous *takóne* forbids opening a letter addressed to someone else. To this day it is customary (often in a humorous vein), in both Hebrew and Yiddish, to write on an envelope the acronym *bekhadrag* which designates the phrase

meaning “subject to the ban of Rabeynu Gershom!”

Gershom established a chain of teacher-student “generations” that picked up in many ways where the Talmud had left off some five hundred years earlier. A pupil of his pupils was Rashi (acronym of Rabbi Solomon son of Isaac, 1040—1105) whose straightforward, easy to understand commentary on the Bible and Talmud has remained a “must.” For centuries it has been published right alongside the text of those basic works of Judaism. Rashi was born in France and acquired his education in the yeshivas at Mainz and Worms. In geo-cultural terms, Ashkenaz had become a new center to which the most talented scholars were now coming for their Talmudic studies.

Torah studies received another major boost from Jacob ben Asher (around 1270—1340) who compiled a major new compendium of Jewish law. Like Maimonides before him (and taking into account Maimonides’ advances), he reorganized Jewish law. His great new work became known as the *Tur* (a word meaning “column,” as in a column of text) and in a tradition that has stayed with Ashkenazic Jews to this day, he himself became known by the popular name of his work. Thus in yeshivas today, students speak of the opinion of “The Tur” on this or that matter of Jewish law. The work is divided into four *túrim*, or columns. They deal with (a) blessings, prayers, festivals, Sabbath; (b) ritual (kosher) slaughtering of animals, usury, idolatry, mourning; (c) marriage and divorce; (d) civil law and interpersonal relations.

In other words, the Tur took the content of over a thousand years of rabbinic work and remolded it into a brand new structure that reflected neither the original order of compilation of the laws (the orders of the Talmud) nor a “neat” Maimonidean division based on logical principles. His organization was based instead on the everyday life of the Ashkenazic Jew, on the cycles of days, months, years, festivals and so forth. More than ever before in Jewish history, a Jewish society arose in which people willingly obeyed countless regulations covering so many things each day to the point where the term “religion” is meaningless as the designation for a separated-out compartment of life. The Ashkenazic “religion” is *life* for its people. The obedience was rooted in profound belief in the ultimate divine origin of the laws, as interpreted by the greatest rabbinic authorities. It is little wonder that traditional Yiddish has no separate word for “religion” and the “Yiddishized internationalism” *religye* had to be coined to coincide with the modern western concept back in the nineteenth century.

Traditional Ashkenazim do not regard these vast numbers of laws as “restrictions.” It is a mindset completely different to the modern westerner’s. The myriad restrictions are thought of as *privileges* of the people chosen by God to have received these laws. Even a small sampling suffices to demonstrate that this is a lifestyle that would be considered restrictive, to put it mildly, by modern westerners (and of course, modern secular Jews). Traveling, writing, igniting fire (or in modern times, electricity) are forbidden on the Sabbath

(from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday; the Jewish day is counted from sundown to sundown). As noted earlier, males over the age of majority must pray three times a day, don phylacteries during weekday morning prayers, and utter a phalanx of blessings to be said over any food or drink taken each time. Married couples must obey the laws of sexual purity, which entail abstinence for the duration of the monthly period and seven days thereafter until the woman is able to go to the ritual bath. The laws of *káshrus* (keeping kosher) entail mastery of many details of what is permitted and what not. The list could go on and on, and in Ashkenazic society, many customs that came to have the same sanctity as the laws were added making for a maximally structured daily life. For the Ashkenazic Jew, adherence to the laws and customs, known as keeping the laws of the Torah (even if the vast majority were elaborated and detailed by rabbinic scholars for thousands of years after the events described in the Pentateuch), is a daily reality that is taken as naturally in the world’s order of things as the sun, the moon and the stars.

Some cultural historians see in the intensity of the Ashkenazic lifestyle a certain response to an existence where religiously motivated massacres and the choice of “baptism or death” were frequently encountered. Jewish calamities of the era included the expulsion of the Jews of Mainz in 1012; the Crusades, from 1096 to 1291; the Rindfleisch Massacres in one hundred and forty-six localities in 1298; the Armleder bands (1336—1339); the massacres following upon the

Black Death (1348—1349), and more and more.

In addition to remarkable progress in rabbinic culture in the midst of all this, a deeply spiritual movement arose. Its adherents were known as Hasidei Ashkenaz, the Hasidim (“pious ones”) of Ashkenaz (not to be confused with the eighteenth century Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe, though certain elements are common to both). The Hasidei Ashkenaz movement stressed mystical moods; the unity and indescribability of God (as distinguished from anthropomorphic descriptions meant to serve another purpose); the power of Hebrew names of God and of the intermediate beings between God and this world; and a love of God that readily extends to martyrdom, known as *kidesh hashém* (*kiddúsh hashém*). The term literally means “sanctification of the name [of God]” but came over time to refer to such sanctification by dying rather than changing or renouncing one’s faith. The central work of the group is the *Séyfer Khsidim* (*Sefer Hasidim*, “Book of Hasidim”), much of which is attributed to the group’s key figure, Yehude Khosid (Yehuda he-Hasid, Judah the Hasid) who was born in the Rhineland around 1150 and moved eastward to become Judah of Regensburg. He died around 1217 and taught extreme humility, declaring it forbidden, for example, for an author to sign his name to his own book.

The Hasidim of Ashkenaz stressed strict adherence to ethics and morals in everyday life, and some were led to ascetism and periods of seclusion to help attain the necessary higher levels of spirituality. The belief in Love of God as a very

high level in itself was closely intertwined with the readiness to sanctify His name by martyrdom when Jews were being butchered on account of their religion. A forthright analysis of traditional Ashkenazic civilization demonstrates that *kidesh hashém* remained, for the better part of a thousand years, a very real proposition for this wholly peaceful population. To the cultural historian it comes as little surprise, that when the worst case of mass genocide in human history, the Holocaust, was to target Ashkenazic Jewry all those centuries later, the majority of those still steeped in the old Ashkenazic traditions and beliefs were fully prepared *tsu geyn af kidesh hashém* (“to go on *kidesh hashém*,” to perish for the sake of God). The majority had no interest in “resisting.” That is something very hard for moderns (including modern Jews) to come to terms with.

Over the centuries, a number of great rabbinic leaders established themselves in the permanent pantheon of Torah study giants. One of them was called the *Maharil* (Jacob Mollin, 1360—1427). In addition to his works on Jewish law, and the leadership he provided to his people in painful times, his comments on Ashkenazic customs and practices, preserved by his pupil Zalmen of St. Goar in the *Séyfer Maharil* (“Book of the Maharil”), became a living book of traditions that is still in use today in traditional communities.

Another was Isserlin (Israel ben Pesachia, 1390—1460). He established a yeshiva in Wiener-Neustadt where he trained a generation of rabbis who went out far and wide to provide legal and moral leadership.

It is important to understand that the concept *rabónim* (literally “rabbis”), the plural of *rov*, is not quite identical to our modern concept of who and what rabbis are. The *rabónim* were, so to speak, the intellectual class of Ashkenaz: its writers on an array of subjects (law, religion, logic, cosmology, ethics, history and more) in a number of genres. Some of these genres, such as the liturgical poem, more or less match the modern notion of a poem (though it is a very specific kind of poem that is not written in the poet’s spoken language and that often openly borrows and makes a mosaic of phrases and even whole texts from biblical quotations). Others are very different. *Sháyles utshúves* (literally “questions and answers”), usually called Responsa literature by modern scholars, are compilations of questions and answers on legal matters arising in everyday life. The questions may have really been sent to the writer, or he may “abstract” years of rulings on matters arising into queries and responses as a literary genre. The most common rabbinic work is the *péyrush* or commentary on an earlier text, often on an earlier commentary. A literature comprising commentaries upon commentaries upon commentaries (etc.) thus became a hallmark of Ashkenazic rabbinic creativity.

From the earliest times, the vernacular of the Ashkenazim was the language they themselves created: Yiddish, which dates from the first generations of Ashkenazic settlement. The remnants of spoken Hebrew and (to a greater extent than appreciated) Aramaic (itself containing an evolved Hebrew component) fused in a highly specific and very Jewish way with local medieval

city dialects of German. The result was a new and dynamic language, Yiddish, that was to become the third great language of the Jewish people, after the periods of Hebrew and Aramaic.

Yiddish became the universal spoken language of the Ashkenazim. But with few exceptions, it was Hebrew and Aramaic that were used for literary creativity on the part of rabbinic scholars. The basic creative uses of Hebrew included commentaries on the Bible and other sacred works; Responsa literature; community records and correspondence; occasional works of prose on a variety of topics; liturgical poetry. While there was near universal literacy, the ability to actually comprehend unseen Hebrew texts, and certainly, the ability to write works in Hebrew, was limited to a small elite of educated males. Aramaic was even more limited and prestigious, used for the two highest pursuits in the eyes of the society in question: Talmudic and Kabbalistic works. It was also a conventional “working practice” to write a commentary in the language in which the primary text was written in the first place.

Thus a very learned Ashkenazi would speak Yiddish to his family, his friends, and his students; would write a letter to a colleague or a Bible commentary in Hebrew; and a work of Talmudic commentary or Kabbalah in Aramaic. This linguistic tapestry may be referred to as the *internal trilingualism of Ashkenaz*. The qualifier “internal” is important. Every Ashkenazi had enough command of the local non-Jewish language to communicate with non-Jewish neighbors. If it were not for extensive communication, Yiddish

would not have Germanic-derived elements as its (statistically) majority stock. Nor would it have the pronounced Slavic component which East European Yiddish acquired over a number of centuries.

Women were excluded from the world of Talmudic learning. In the eyes of the society in question, their role in educating children to lives loyally dedicated to Torah, and especially in educating their sons to strive to high achievement in Torah studies, was (and in traditional communities still is) considered a goal of the highest importance.

Still, it did not make for a sufficient intellectual life for women. As if to rectify this in a way that would not contradict its principles and laws, Ashkenazic society came up with, as it were, a novel corrective. Women became prominent as the primary readers, frequent commissioning agents for, and before long (though we do not know exactly when), writers of popular literature in the spoken language, Yiddish.

Early Yiddish literature is largely “secular” in the sense that it comprised popular adaptations from German, Italian and other European epics. The oldest known continuous literary text in Yiddish is dated 1382, and it was found, of all places, in Cairo, Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century. It was rediscovered for Yiddish scholarship only in the mid twentieth century. Some of its contents are indeed Yiddish versions of medieval German epics, such as *Dukus Horant*. Others entail a kind of literary synthesis that is in a way symbolic of Yiddish and Ashkenaz more generally. They use

European form (the epic poem) as a new genre for the retelling of classical *Jewish* narratives, such as the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers. And thus, Yiddish literature emerges as a synthesis of east and west, every bit as much as the language itself is an indivisible union of the ancient Near East and contemporary Europe.

By the time Yiddish printing got under way in the 1540s, there were long established texts of such Old Yiddish classics as the *Shmuel bukh* (Samuel Book) and the *Mlokhim bukh* (Kings Book). Thinking about it, the multiple intrigues, romances, battles and entanglements recounted in the biblical books of Samuel and Kings lend themselves naturally to the spirit of medieval knights, castles and battles. Not infrequently, the Yiddish versions produce early Yiddish humor resulting from the comic juxtaposition of knights in battle and everyday Jewish life and customs.

By the sixteenth century, many rabbis were a little worried about the massive popularity of this secular Yiddish literature. They were worried that everyday people, men and women alike, who were not immersed in the religious and ethical works that were intended for simple people, might be led astray. Or, to put it more positively, they realized that use of the vernacular combined with the power of the printing press was a powerful new tool for educating men and women alike who were not part of that educated elite who could really partake of and enjoy the Hebrew and Aramaic literature of Ashkenaz.

A substantial body of religious literature in Yiddish grew in a variety of genres, including

books of morals and ethics, books on Jewish law, and translations of Hebrew texts starting with the Torah and the prayer book. In the late sixteenth century one of the most popular Yiddish works of all time, the *Tséne-réne* was compiled. It is a graceful retelling of the stories in the most beloved parts of the Bible in a homespun Yiddish, with many traditional Jewish comments and interpretations woven in to the fabric of the narrative, rather than appended to it as commentary. The title comes from the feminine plural imperative *Tseéno ureéno* (“Go forth and see [O daughters of Zion]” from Song of Songs 3: 11).

The structure of internal Ashkenazic trilingualism is illustrated on page 44. There is only one spoken Jewish language, Yiddish (though as noted, there was always ability to communicate to the local non-Jews in the coterritorial non-Jewish language). There are two sacred written languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, in which texts hailing from the ancient Near East were written. Where all three Ashkenazic languages come into play is in the potential for written creativity. Texts emanating from Ashkenaz are in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Yiddish.

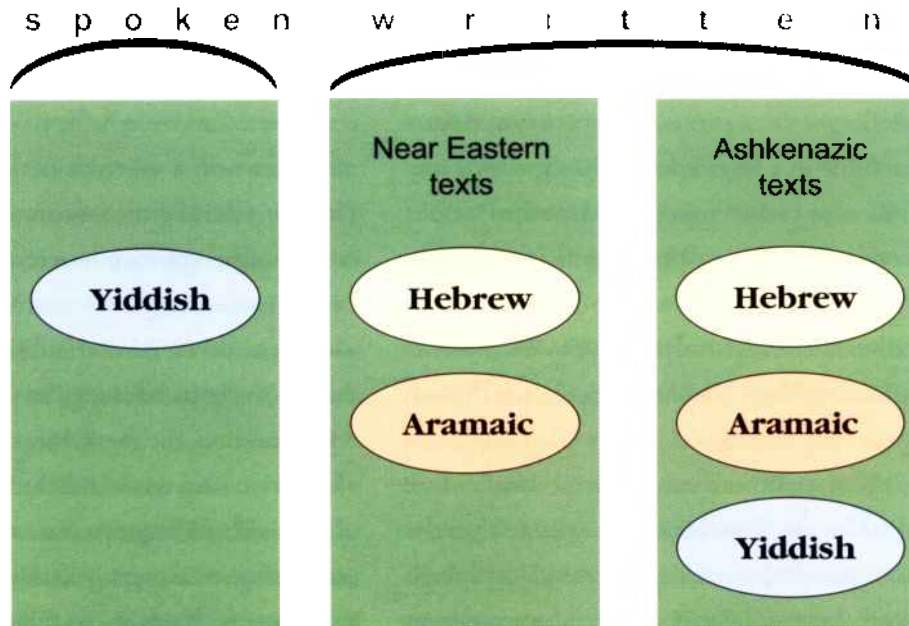
The functional distribution, so to speak, of the three languages is illustrated in the chart on the traditional status of the three languages on page 44. In other words, a relatively stable situation evolved. The three languages found themselves complementing each other gracefully. Yiddish is everybody’s native language, there is near universal literacy in the native language, and it is the language of popular literature that reaches out throughout the soci-

ety. Then come the non-spoken, sacred, Hebrew and Aramaic which although not vernaculars are very far from “dead languages.” In addition to being recited in the daily prayers, they are studied in the classical Jewish texts. Most remarkably, both continue to survive in Ashkenaz as creative written mediums with a salient functional distribution. Hebrew is used for the more mundane purposes of community records and correspondence, and the “easier” subjects of Bible and Mishna. Aramaic is used for works on Talmud and Kabbalah, which are the two “highest endeavors” in the eyes of the society in question, the two subjects mastered only by what westerners would call the “top intellectuals” of the society. The green arrow in the graphic denotes rising social prestige as one goes from Yiddish to Hebrew to Aramaic. But this must not be misinterpreted as meaning that Hebrew, or even Yiddish were somehow “low prestige.” They were not.

Ashkenazim did not think about which language is in any sense “better” until much later, when the new forms of Jewish culture were crystallizing for some Ashkenazim on the model of what was happening in Europe at the time, and there developed “Hebrew language nationalism” and “Yiddish language nationalism” (see chapters 10 and 11). During the centuries beforehand, the three languages of Ashkenaz fit into a “natural order” that was rarely challenged. The challenges that are documented invariably relate to Yiddish “coming out of the closet” and being used for purposes that the society had considered to be the turf of Hebrew and Aramaic. Occasionally these challenges resulted in substantial changes, for example

THE THREE JEWISH LANGUAGES OF THE ASHKENAZIM

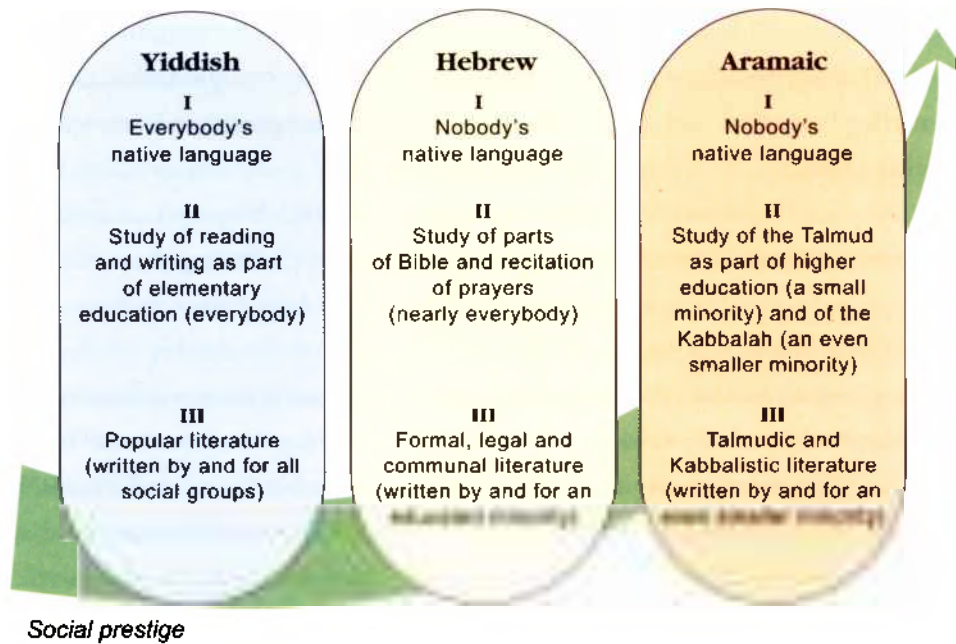
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TRADITIONAL STATUS OF THE THREE LANGUAGES

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in the widespread use of Yiddish prayer, particularly for women. In fact, the major impetus to early Yiddish poetry was provided by women who wrote personal prayers, known as *tkhines* (“supplications”). Languages do not exist apart from their users. These instances of challenge and expansion of the acceptable uses of the vernacular represent a gradually evolving and expanding spiritual and intellectual life of the non-rabbis of the society, most spectacularly of women.



The Ashkenazic willingness to “sanctify God’s name” by submitting to a death imposed by intolerant powers — rather than submitting to baptism — does not mean that the society was in any sense of the term “suicidal.” To the contrary, the hope and dream of the Ashkenazim was, put simply, to live under tolerant rulers who would not oppress, pillage and murder them on account of their religion or ethnicity. Put into the practical terms of the time and place, that meant a search for a better, more tolerant home.

A remarkable quality of Ashkenaz, in fact, is its success at cultural survival in the face of a magnitude of brutality and destruction that has in world history obliterated mighty kingdoms and nation-states. The short version is that the vicious mass-murders in Central Europe (Crusades, Rindfleisch, Black Death and numerous local atrocities), instead of destroying Ashkenaz had the curious effect of moving it — to the east! And that brings us to another surprise from the viewpoint of today’s

popular thinking. For centuries, while the blood-drenched Christian “west” with Germany at its heart was slaughtering the “Christ-killers” there was a golden age of tolerance in Poland and Lithuania to the east.

As the late Max Weinreich put it, “geography was transformed into history.” In other words, the word “Ashkenaz” lost its strict geographic sense (at least as an exclusive definition) and came to designate the migration lands that became the new center, and more crucially, it came to designate the culture rather than any territory at all. The broad strokes of the eastward expansion of Ashkenaz to Poland and Lithuania are illustrated in the map on page 47. It is important to remember that the eastward thrust of the arrows are to be taken as a summary of population movements over the course of centuries, though the specific events (massacres and expulsions) noted for German cities were of course the “primary explanation” (if one is needed) for the escape from those locations. What should not be inferred, however, is any specific correlation of a local expulsion or massacre in the west with any specific place or area among the new settlements in the east. In other words, centuries of continued movement and interchange of Ashkenazic population, during which the overall thrust was west to east, did not result, say, in Ukrainian Jewry being directly relatable to some southern German source and Lithuanian Jewry to some northern German source (though academics come out with such theories from time to time). What happened was that the new Ashkenaz, Eastern Ashkenaz, took on a dynamic of its own with a “free-standing” Jew-

ish configuration, with its own internal differentiation in culture, language, and traditions, that cannot be straightforwardly related to any known pre-existent cultural differentiations in the west (though individual features of dialects and customs can often be traced).

The intellectual history of the *rabónim* can be traced much more readily, and many geographic shifts of culture can be reduced, at least for expository purposes, to a series of biographies of individuals. Max Weinreich took the year 1500 as a symbolic indicator of the period when the “center of gravity” of Ashkenazic civilization “moved” from the German speaking lands to the Slavic and Baltic speaking lands. He and others take the case of Rabbi Yankev (Jacob) Polak as a symbolic figure in the process. Born in the 1460s in Germany, he relocated to Prague, in Bohemia, and then to Cracow in Poland, where he became the first acknowledged master rabbinic authority in Poland (and where he acquired the epithet “Polak”). He died there in 1530. What had happened half a millennium earlier vis-à-vis Babylonia and the original Ashkenaz was now repeating itself between the two “halves” of Ashkenaz. Where communities in Poland and Lithuania would earlier have sent their legal questions to the great rabbinical authorities in Germany, they were now establishing their own great centers of Torah authority in the *new* Ashkenaz — Eastern Ashkenaz.

One of Yankev Polak’s best pupils was Shólem-Shákhne who established the first great yeshiva in Poland, in the city Lublin. He died in 1558. And one of his pupils was the great Moyshe

Isserles (1520s—1572), known by his acronym as the *Ramó*.



There is a conceptual starting point for Ashkenaz, around a thousand years ago, when it comprised the Jewish communities on the banks of the Rhine to its west and the Danube to its east. In other words, at its onset, Ashkenaz comprised the Jewish communities on German speaking soil.

The year of the first Crusade, 1096, may be taken as a starting point for the mass murders and expulsions of early Ashkenazic Jewry, though to be sure there were individual city-wide atrocities beforehand. From the days when the first Ashkenazim escaped to the east, Eastern Ashkenaz was in some sense in the making. It is a moot point to argue about the precise points at which eastern Ashkenaz — Ashkenaz in Slavic and Baltic areas — grew from some individual refugees to a community, to an outpost of the original, Western Ashkenaz, to an equal, to eventually become the primary (or only) Ashkenaz. As we have seen, cultural historians have found it convenient to take the year 1500 as a point when rabbinic authority was passing eastward. By the late eighteenth century, western Ashkenaz had much declined, by the cumulative effects of persecution, emigration and assimilation, and it was ripe for the “Berlin Enlightenment” late in that century (see p. 228). But even then, Ashkenazic culture survived in small enclaves in the west, right into the twentieth century, albeit as a tiny, curious shadow of the new Ashkenaz in the east.

The Eastward Expansion of Ashkenaz to Poland and Lithuania

Scale 1: 15,300,000



The upshot of all this is that for many centuries, the two “halves” of Ashkenaz coexisted and interacted. All of Ashkenaz was by definition *Yiddish speaking Jewry*. It follows therefore that the dialects of the Yiddish language are in effect the internal Jewish subdivisions within Ashkenazic Jewry. Dialect boundaries, as noted, invariably mark more than differences in pronunciation, grammar and usage. They mark differences in other parts of the culture. And, even in the arena of language, the dialect boundaries within Ashkenaz mark much more than different kinds of Yiddish. The pronunciation of Hebrew and Aramaic follows the local Yiddish dialect throughout Ashkenaz, and it was because of the sanctity of these languages in the eyes of the society, and the many laws concerning proper prayer and Torah reading in synagogue, that rabbinic minds debated points of dialect long before such studies became popular in the west.

The basic divide is between west and east. On the territory of the older, western Ashkenaz, the

Yiddish is called *Western Yiddish*. Correspondingly, the Yiddish of eastern Ashkenaz is *Eastern Yiddish*.



Western Yiddish comprises *Northwestern Yiddish* (the Netherlands and northern Germany); *Midwestern Yiddish* (central Germany); and *Southwestern Yiddish* (Alsace, Switzerland, southern Germany and northern Italy).

Eastern Yiddish comprises *Northeastern Yiddish* (the Lithuanian lands); *Mideastern Yiddish* (Poland and parts of Hungary); *Southeastern Yiddish* (Ukraine, comprising Volhynian, Podolian and Bessarabian varieties).

Within Eastern Yiddish, then, Northeastern Yiddish is the language of the Litvaks, and, Northeastern Ashkenaz is by definition, *Lita*, or the territory of Jewish Lithuania. In some circles, it has now become trendy to call this land Litvakia, though we prefer to stick with *Lita* (Yiddish *Líte*, Ashkenazic *Lító*) on the simple grounds of authenticity: the name applied over many centuries by the people themselves, rather than imposed retroactively by today’s scholars.

Dialects of the Yiddish Language

Scale 1: 14,000,000

-  **Jewish Lithuania (Lita, Yiddish *Lite*)**, the historic territory of Lithuanian Jewry: the Litvaks (Yiddish *Litvakes*), and of their Lithuanian Yiddish dialect, upon which the modern literary language is largely based.
-  The areas outside the area of the Pale of Settlement were by and large colonized much later than the classic Lithuanian Jewish territory.



Chapter 4

Lita

It comes as little surprise that the word “Lithuania,” in any of its forms, does not occur in dated Jewish documents that happen to survive from the earliest times of Jewish settlement there. The simple reason is that there *are* no such documents known to scholars. What there was or may have been, is lost and perhaps gone forever. As is usually the case, the earlier Jewish history of a place is known from explicit documents in non-Jewish sources (such as the charters of rights granted by Witold in 1388 and 1389) or from archaeological evidence (such as the 1171 gravestone in Eysishok not far from Vilna). Bishop Adalbert of Prague, who was sent by the Polish Duke Boleslaw I to preach Christianity in Lithuania in 997 makes mention of Jews there. But the “presence of some Jews in Lithuania” in these early times does not necessarily signify anything relatable to the continuous Lithuanian Jewish community (though it certainly may). On the other hand, the first solid evidence of such a community centuries later does not imply that it came into existence just before *that* coincidentally “discovered mention.” In other words, the commu-

nity arose gradually over the centuries, and any search for some single starting point is a mistake. At the same time, early attestations (such as the Stone of Eysishok) serve a valuable symbolic purpose, if they are not overstated. They are hard evidence from a time from which there is precious little.

The great Jewish historian Simon Dubnov (1860—1941) dated the origins of the Jewish communities in the east to the First Crusade of 1096 when large numbers of Ashkenazim began to flee eastward, taking with them their language and culture. It is of course a reasonable inference, leaving open the question of when Lithuanian Jewry was firmly differentiated from Polish Jewry. As we saw at the outset, the modern dialectology and cultural geography of Yiddish has established a Jewish Lithuania that looks very similar to the empire of Grand Duke Gedymin (Gediminas), who lived from around 1275 to 1341.

But that is not to say that names are not important. They are very important. A name signifies that a thing is *perceived* to exist, and in cultural history perceptions are

every bit as important as facts, sometimes more so. A person may be named shortly after he or she is born, but communities, languages, and other social constructs are often named a long time after they come into existence. And, it is common practice for moderns to extend an eventual name backward in time to the very beginning for purposes of identification and discussion, and yes, for the more subjective purpose of establishing a longer, rather than a shorter history. When did Canaanite become Hebrew? In most cases there can be no rigid answer, though cataclysmic historic events, like the Norman Invasion of Britain in 1066 can be said to be relatable to the shift from Anglo-Saxon to English. It is acceptable to extend a name backward in time, as long as the practice is stated openly, and as long as the known earlier names are noted, and not discredited as “wrong” because they are politically incorrect for later times.

Turning from these general sentiments to the history of Ashkenaz, it is important in the first place to remember that “contemporary history” was not a priority of the Ashkenazic rabbinic establishment. Places and settlements get mentioned when they happen to occur in a legal (or other) practical question that arose. In medieval rabbinic nomenclature, there is the old Ashkenaz in the west, and then Poland (in Jewish sources *Polin* or *Poylin*), then, Russia (*Rus[i]ya*), then Muscovy (*Moskva*). Final *a* is used, as noted earlier, in place names that end in the unstressed vowel, as neutral English transcriptions, where the basic name, rather than its variants, are at issue. Using our retrospective knowledge of the specific cities and

towns referred to, it becomes obvious that references to *Rusya* are possibly or definitely (depending upon the source) in fact references to places known as being in the heartland of Lithuanian Jewry.

The eleventh century scholar Eliezer ben Noson (Nathan) of Mainz, Germany, considered to be the earliest Ashkenazic scholar who wrote a complete book that has survived, records his travels to the east, referring to specific customs of the Jews of “Russia” in a context where it is absolutely clear he cannot be referring to locations east of what became the territory of Lithuania. The twelfth century Itze (Isaac) of Chernigov, one of the first rabbinic scholars in the east, traveled in the other direction and visited the Jewish communities in central Europe. The localization to Chernigov is particularly important, because we know it from later centuries as characteristic of the southeastern reaches of Jewish Lithuania. The Vatican Library contains a Bible commentary dated 1094 that was likewise written in “Russia.”

More “early sightings” could be mentioned. They all prove that there were Jews, and even rabbinic scholars, on the territory of Lithuania from the eleventh century onward, but do not go to the crux of the question of the continuous settlement and more importantly, the specific culture of Lithuanian Jewry.

For that question it may be worthwhile to ask what traditions later Lithuanian Jewry itself had about its origins. The best known tradition is the collective memory of the benevolent welcome of the Lithuanian grand dukes, particularly

Gedymin (Gediminas, ±1275—1341) and Witold (Vytautas, 1350—1430). It was of course during their reigns that the cumulative horror of the oppression in the west was reaching a certain climax (see the map on page 47).

And what about Lithuanian Jewish traditions about the origins of Lithuanian Jewish culture per se? There is in fact a tradition about a “first” Lithuanian Jewish scholar, and he is not one of those eleventh, twelfth or thirteenth century individuals who modern historians happen to know about. His is rather Moyshe ben Yankev (Moses ben Jacob) of Shadov (Shádeve, now Šeduva, Lithuania). He was born there in 1449, and moved on to Lida (Líde, now Lida, Belarus), and was taken captive and exiled to the Crimea in 1506. He lived in Constantinople and Adrianople (where he married), in Kiev, and for many years in his final home in the Crimea. To Lithuanian Jews he is known as *Méyshe ha-Géyle* (standard Yiddish *Móyshe ha-Góyle*, “Moses the Exile”). His literary output covered much of the gamut of rabbinic literature (with the notable exception of legalistic works on the Talmud, which seems not to have been his main interest). He wrote a “supercommentary” to the classic Torah commentary of the Sephardic scholar Abraham ibn Ezra (1089—1164); a kabbalistic tract on the upper *sefirot* (the ten stages of emanation between God and His creations in the Kabbalah); a Hebrew grammar; a work on the Hebrew calendar; an exotic work on cryptic writing; liturgical poetry; and a polemic work in which he debated with Karaite scholars (whom he befriended on

many of his travels; see the appendix on the Karaites, pp. 369-374). He also edited a prayerbook which for generations was known as representing the traditions of Kaffa (now the Crimean resort town Feodosia), his final home. He returned to his native Shadov at least once.

Meyshe ha-Geyle thus fits the classic mold of the founding father who is remembered as launching a tradition in spite of not having any direct pupils or followers. His intellectual approach was original and daring, his was a restless personality, and he relished debate. These were all to be counted among the folkloristic features of the later Lithuanian Jewish scholar.

The word for “Lithuania” is thought to be attested in known dated documents from the fifteenth century onward (“known and dated” being the two prerequisites for unambiguous evidence nowadays that *x* was already used as a known quantity by that time). That word is *Lito* in formal Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic, *Lite* in spoken Yiddish, and *Lita* in modern Hebrew, as well as in general English. All these are subsumed under the single Jewish alphabet form of older times (lamed-yud-tes-alef). From the late nineteenth century onward, the Jewish alphabet spelling developed distinctive forms for the Yiddish *Líte* (with final ayin), and modern Hebrew *Líta* (with final hey).

Individual towns and cities in Lita are mentioned earlier, but these mentions do not go to the question of which land these Jewish people *felt* part of, and how they were perceived by Jews in other countries.

From the fifteenth century onward there is an unbroken tradition of reference to Lita (which we may assume was pronounced *Lite* in spoken Yiddish from the outset). Among the earliest references are those in the preserved legal replies (respona) of the great western Ashkenazic rabbinic scholar Isserlin (1390—1460). It occurs in a reply about a gentleman who had returned from Lita. From the casual use of the term it can be safely deduced that the name in its Jewish form was by then well known. Rabbinic style didn't incline toward the newest slang usages. Casual occurrence of a geographic concept means that that concept was probably there long before that.

And, not long thereafter, Jewish Lithuania was perceived to have its own internal divisions, which again, must be older than the first coincidental survivals. The western area appears as *Zamet* (or *Zamut*). This is of course the Yiddish term for Samogitia (Lithuanian *Žemaitija*), an area which Witold conquered in the Battle of Tannenberg in 1410.

The eastern area becomes known as *Raysn*. The word may be etymologically related to the older German *Reussen* ("Russia"), but unlike the earlier rabbinic use of the term *Rusiya*, it is not ambiguous. It refers to eastern Lita, an area including Vitebsk, Mohilov and Gomel.

As is so often the case in Jewish cultural history, the internal borders do not match the political non-Jewish borders from which they derive. The eastern border of *Zamet* and the western border of *Raysn* continued to be slippery entities right up to the modern era.

In later times, other smaller regions came to be conceived as components of Lita, too: Courland in the north (present day western Latvia), Latgalia to its east (now eastern Latvia), and Polesya in the far southwest bordering on northern Ukraine (a region now split between southwestern Belarus and northwestern Ukraine).

The internal configuration of Jewish Lithuania is illustrated in the map on page 55. There is a fair amount of correspondence between the major regions and the principal non-Jewish language with which Litvaks would have been most familiar, though like others in the entire region, they often spoke more than one of the surrounding languages. In *Zamet*, the principal language was Lithuanian; in central Lita, Belorussian (now more correctly rendered Belarusian in English) and Polish; in eastern Lita, Belorussian. For many centuries, Polish, and then Russian, served as the "imperial" language that was learned for dealings with officialdom. The coterritorial languages are sketched schematically, for orientation, on the map on p. 56.

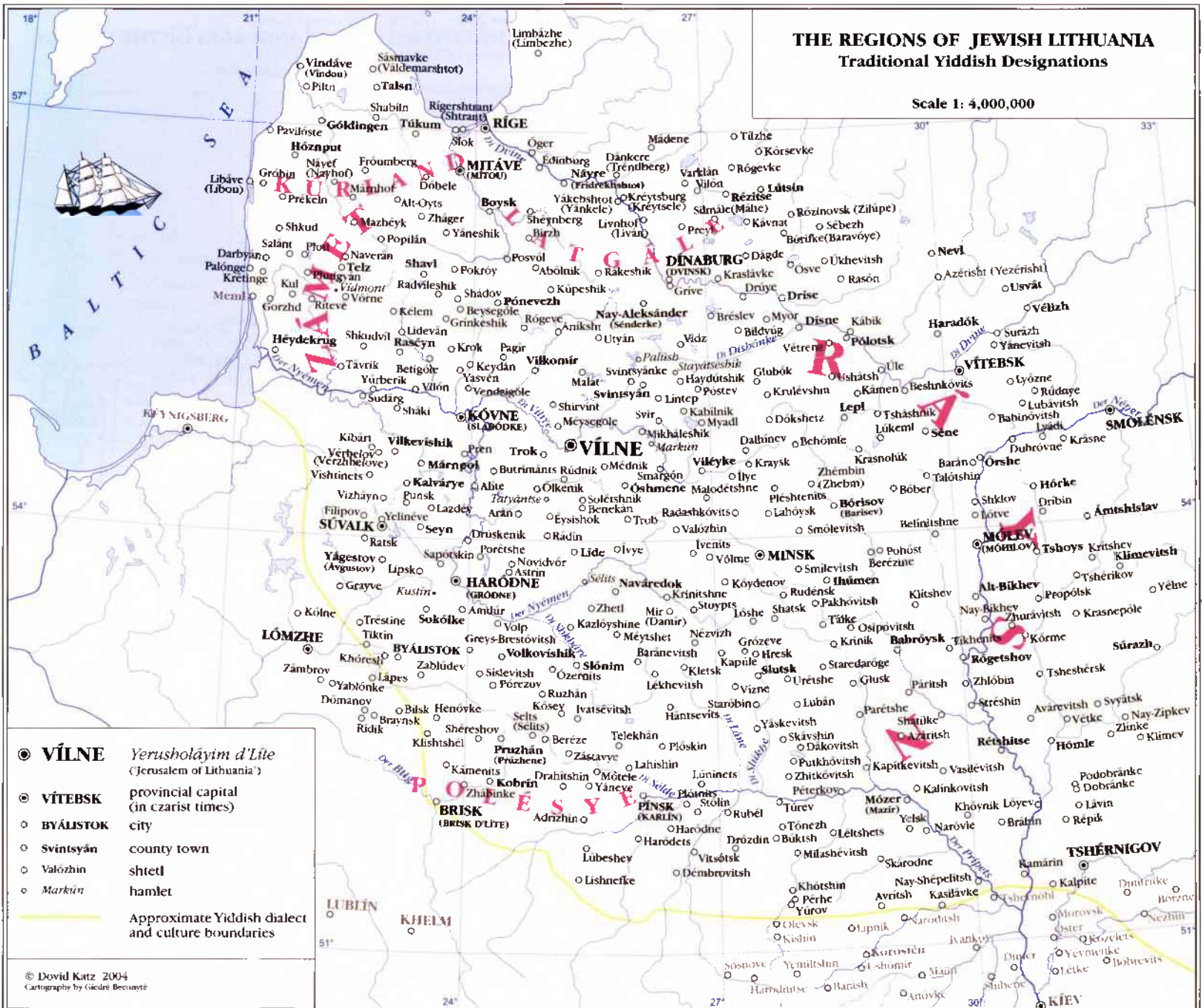


To fathom the cultural milieu evolving in Lita, it is important to walk several steps further into the thick of rabbinic culture in Ashkenazic (and not only Ashkenazic) society. In the eyes of the society, the great *rabónim* had legal power beyond just the aura of respect and authority, and beyond the ability to decide questions of law that

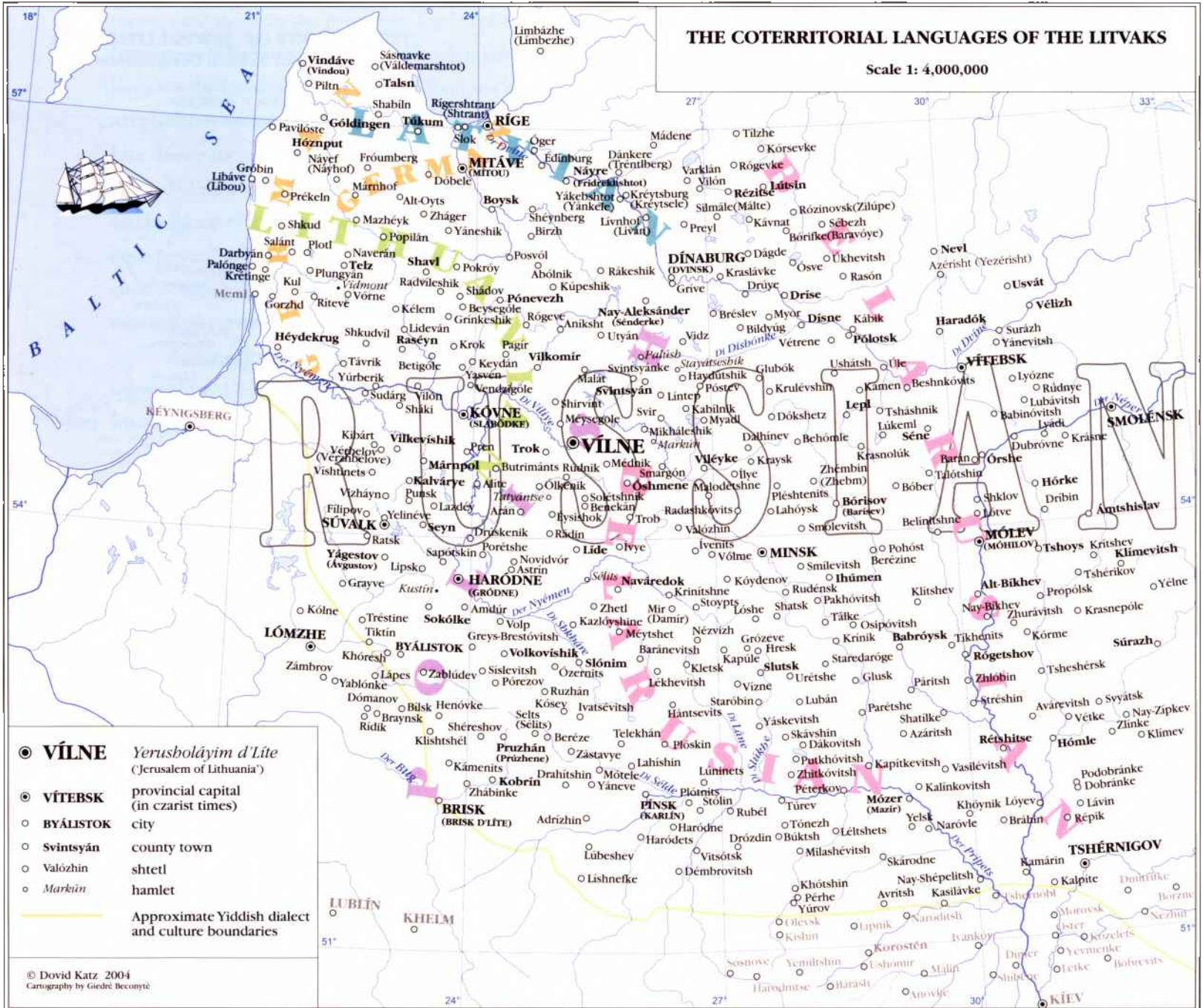
THE REGIONS OF JEWISH LITHUANIA

Traditional Yiddish Designations

Scale 1: 4,000,000



- **VILNE** Yerusholayim d'Lite (Jerusalem of Lithuania)
- **VITEBSK** provincial capital (in czarist times)
- **BYALISTOK** city
- **Svintsyán** county town
- **Valozhin** shtetl
- *Markún* hamlet
- Approximate Yiddish dialect and culture boundaries



were theoretical rather than practical (such as laws of ancient animal sacrifices, laws of the Temple in Jerusalem, or on waging war). Through the institution of the rabbinic court, the *bes-din* (*bezdn* in usual spoken Yiddish), they wielded enormous clout in all kinds of matters that arise in daily life.

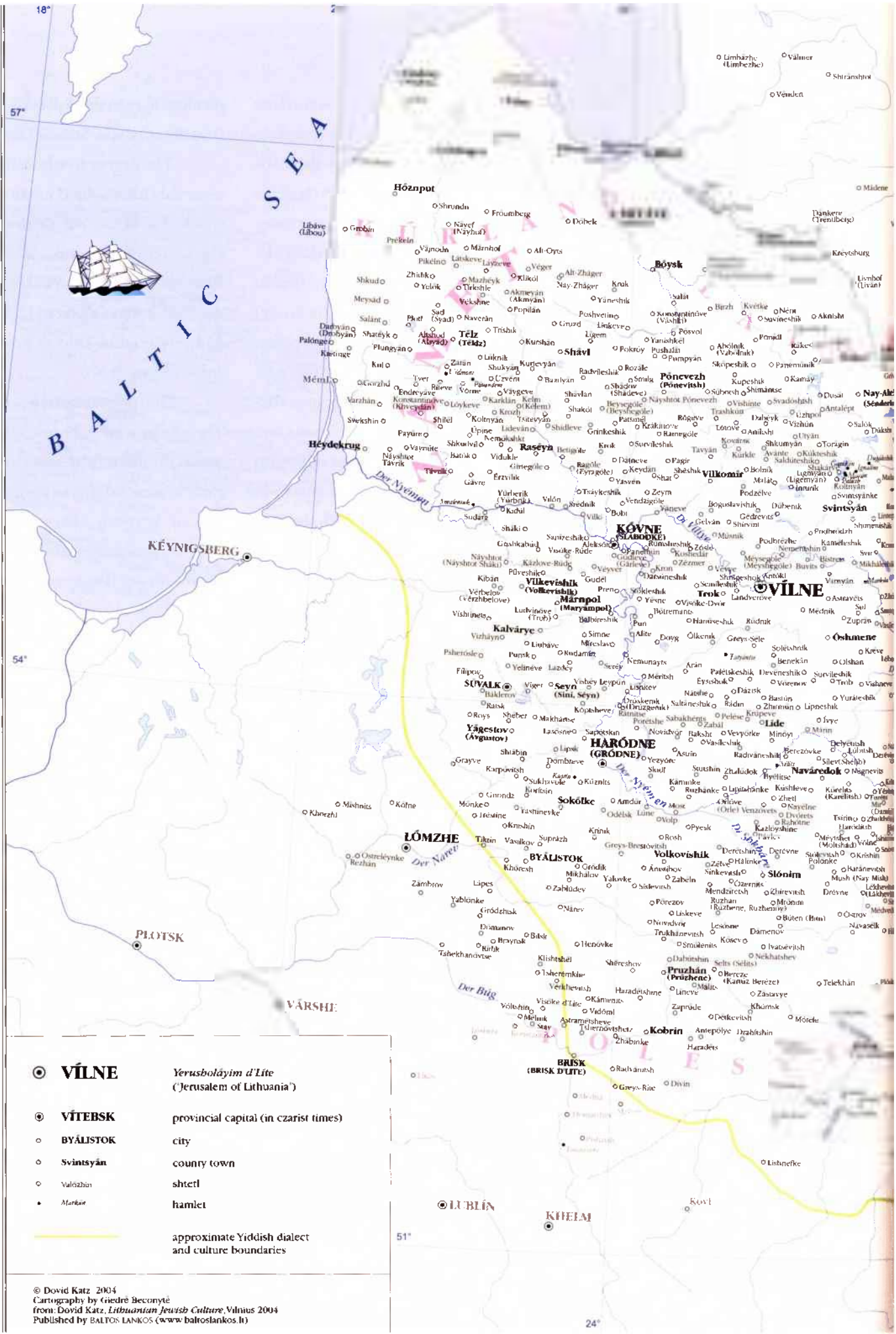
The realm of these powers covered (and in traditional communities continues to cover) myriad matters of birth, marriage, divorce, death; kosherness of food in many doubtful cases; interpersonal, civil, financial and business disputes; questions on observance of religious law, Sabbaths, holidays, prayers; questions arising on how to deal with all sorts of real life situations in internal Jewish life and in relations with the outside world. While single town rabbis could decide many questions, issues demanding a full court had to be adjudicated in rabbinic courts of three judges following to the hilt the laws of courts as laid out in the Torah, as interpreted in the Talmudic tractate *Sanhédrin*, as evolved over time by the growing body of Jewish legal literature (in Hebrew or Aramaic). *Sanhédrin* was the name of the great supreme court in the times of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

Even in places where authority was not officially granted to the rabbinic courts by the powers that be, there was a taboo within the Jewish community on taking any dispute to government courts. Things had to be solved where possible by the Jewish court, and this societal pressure itself conferred vast authority on such courts. Moreover, on matters of purely Jewish law (like whether a certain food is kosher), it would have been quite ri-

diculous to even think of taking the question to the (usually not philo-Semitic) civil authorities.

The degree to which life and law were inseparably intertwined meant that the legal system had to be a sophisticated and stable one for the society to function. There is a highly developed vocabulary for speaking about this system, much of it deriving from Hebrew and Aramaic, and rendered in Yiddish pronunciation among Ashkenazim.

One pivotal word is *póyseck* (plural *póskim*). The *póskim* were rabbinic scholars whose judgments on matters of new, open or disputed law came to have validity in their generation (and often far beyond). They are sometimes called “codifiers” in English though not all of them compiled codes of law; some simply issued decisions and rulings which came to be recognized as inspired and accurate. One way of looking at Jewish traditional intellectual history (or the history of Torah study in the sense in which the concept is used by traditional communities) is as a dual track enterprise in which some scholars seek certain higher truths, for the sake of pure scholarship, while others become engrossed in matters of practical law. For example, many rabbinic scholars have dedicated their lives to the minutest laws of the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem when Messiah will come. Others have invested the same magnitude of time and talent in the minutest laws of forbidden and permitted foods in the time and place in which they lived. Both types concentrate on law. Many other rabbinic minds preferred speculative Kabbalah and wrote treatises on the

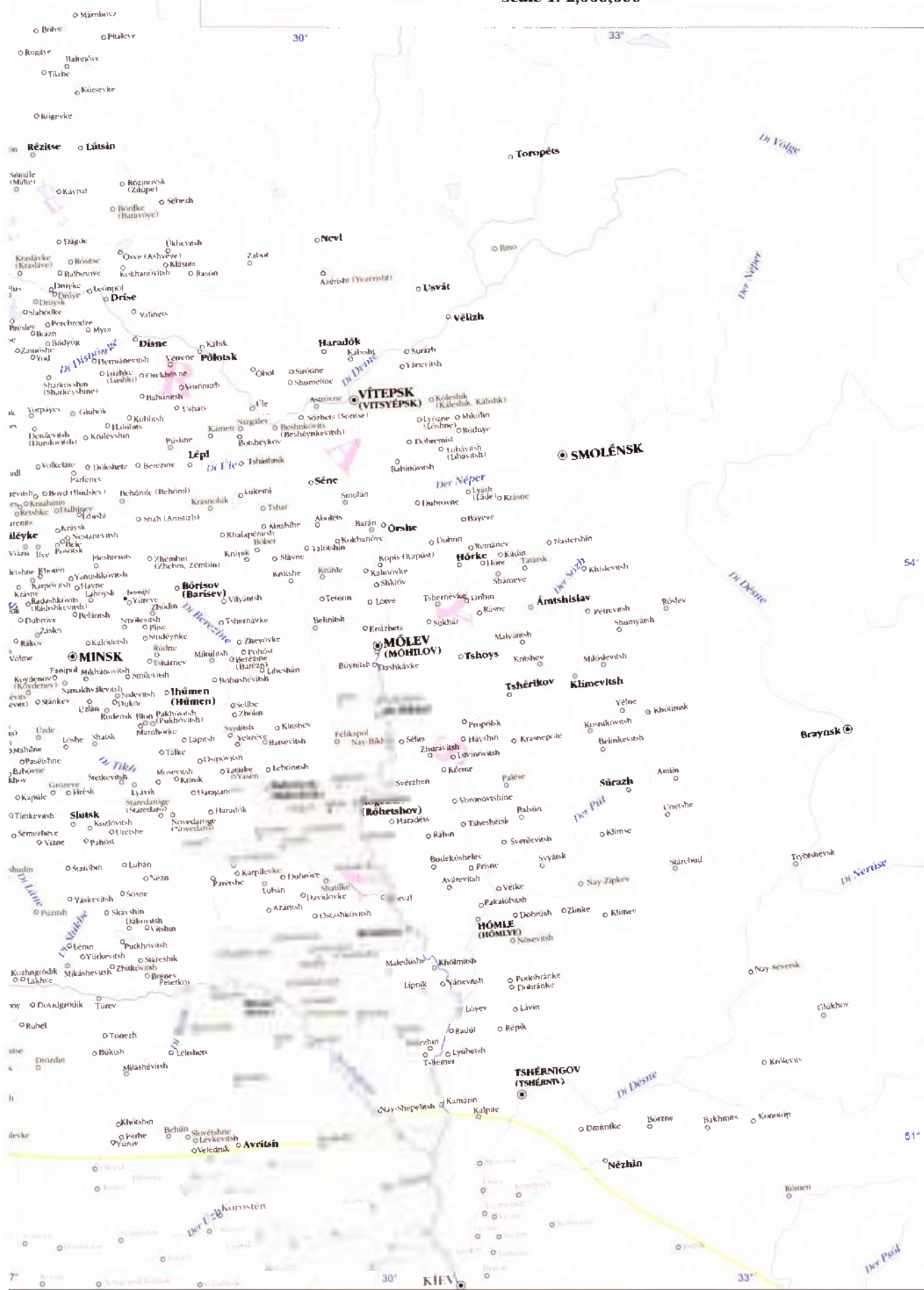


- **VILNE** Yerusholayim d'Lite ('Jerusalem of Lithuania')
- **VITEBSK** provincial capital (in czarist times)
- **BYALISTOK** city
- **Svintsyan** county town
- Valozhin shtetl
- Markai hamlet
- approximate Yiddish dialect and culture boundaries

LITA (LÍTE): JEWISH LITHUANIA

Approximate Territory of Northeastern Yiddish

Scale 1: 2,000,000



origins of the universe, and still others specialized in Bible commentary. Again, it is necessary to remember that the concept *rabónim* is better translated “recognized scholars in traditional Jewish society” rather than “rabbis” in any modern sense, though to be called *rov*, one needed rabbinic ordination.

The top scholars from among the *rabónim* of each generation might achieve the title *góen* (modern Hebrew and popular English usage *gaon*), a term designating a person of exquisite mental talent in traditional Jewish learning (and in modern Yiddish and Hebrew extended to the concept “genius” more generally). There is even a special term for a young scholar of rare talents, *íluy*, who shows signs of turning into a future *góen*.

These scholars acquired this (and other) rabbinic epithets neither by further degrees or diplomas, nor by any form of formal election by committees or communities (though there were processes of selection for official community or town rabbis).

The title *góen* was acquired by an individual over decades by growing universal acknowledgment of his brilliance in Torah studies coupled with traits of character (humility and disdain of luxuries and money are a recurring measure). In certain times and places, a capacity for leadership was also called for, and great rabbinic figures sometimes became legendary leaders of their communities. In Jewish lore, this is best known from the Maharál of Prague (Yehude-Leyb ben Betsalel, ±1525—1609). The historical Maharál was a brilliant author on a wide range of

subjects. In Jewish lore, he is said to have created, through kabbalistic means, the famous Golem of Prague, a “homunculus,” to save the city’s Jews from an awful threat. It became a key topic in twentieth century Yiddish literature.

Once a high status was attained, the scholar would frequently be known (as might other authors of books) by an acronym derived from his own name, the name of a beloved book he wrote, or even an intimate Yiddish form of his name. So it was, for example, in the case of two of the eminent fourteenth and fifteenth century rabbinic leaders of western Ashkenaz encountered above. Jacob Mollin remains known as *der Maharil* (“the Maharil”) after the acronym fashioned from one of the forms of his “extended name.” Many rabbinic acronyms start with *Maha-* derived from the words *Moyreynu hoRav*. Literally, the words translate as “our teacher the rabbi” and in the cultural history of Ashkenazic Jewry the words came to mean that the person so designated was regarded as a major teacher of his generation. On some occasions, a more intimate appellation “stuck.” Israel ben Pesachia became best known as *Isserlin* (the western Yiddish diminutive of *Iser*, which itself derives from an old Yiddish form of “Israel”).

The *póskim* occupy a special place in virtue of their concentration on everyday law, on matters of potential concern to an entire population under their jurisdiction, even if they also passed rulings on many matters not directly relevant to daily life. The work of the *póskim* over many centuries can be compared, with all the usual caveats, to that of a long standing legislature which evolves

a nation's laws over time, always taking into consideration both precedents and the changing needs of the times.

Such a legislative tradition requires a stable community of scholars. A minimum of peace and tranquility are prerequisites for almost any prolonged and intensive scholarly activity. It is scarcely a surprise that the high points were reached in times and places where traditional Jewish civilization was able to thrive in the context of the contemporary "external" situation. This is where European history and its Jewish component crucially interact.

The "Golden Age" of Sephardic Jewry produced a Maimonides whose code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, remains a major milestone in Jewish law and history. Jacob ben Asher, "the Tur," the great Ashkenazic *póysek*, spent much of his life in the relative peace and quiet of Toledo, Spain. While the turbulent history of early Ashkenaz produced many individual cases of genius and creativity, the center of gravity of Jewish legal scholarship was moving eastward to Poland along with the major population shift to Poland. It seems that in the case of each of the population shifts of the Ashkenazim (from the German speaking lands to Poland; and from both those lands to Lithuania — the vaunted "eastward trek"), it took several centuries for Talmudic culture to fully establish itself. As we have seen, the year 1500 is taken as a symbolic shift from Germany to Poland, as it is around that time that some of the most talented scholars moved eastward and established themselves in the midst of preexisting

Jewish communities that were "ripe" for this development.

But the international nature of Jewish scholarly development means that it is not enough to limit even a brief overview to the Ashkenazic area or even to Europe. In fact, the most sensational single advance in legal codification after the Sephardic Maimonides (the Rámbam) and the Ashkenazic Tur came from the pen of Joseph Karo. Born in Spain or Portugal in 1488, he found himself, as a boy, among the exiles fleeing the Spanish Inquisition of 1492. He spent much of his life in Nicopolis and Adrianople in Turkey, before settling in the Land of Israel in the 1530s. He eventually settled in the famed "city of Kabbalists," Safad, where he died in 1575. His great work, the *Shúlkhon órukh* (*Shulhan Aruch*) is organized according to the structure of the Ashkenazic Tur. In a sense there is a direct chain of works here, from Mishna to Talmud to Maimonides to the Tur to Karo and his *Shúlkhon órukh*. It remains one of the most studied reference works of Jewish law.

There was, however, one impediment. Karo, not surprisingly, preferred his native Sephardic laws and rulings over those of the Ashkenazim where the two major European Jewish cultures clashed. And in many instances, he wasn't familiar with central and eastern European practice. Yet it was too much a work of genius, a work necessary for rabbinic law, to be rejected; moreover, in a multitude of cases, the rulings *did* apply to both "halves" of European Jewry. It was left to a younger contemporary (who actually died a few years before Karo) to write "emendations"

to the *Shúlkhon órukh* that were themselves to amount, cumulatively, to a work of brilliance. That contemporary was the Ramó, as Moyshe ben Yisroel (Moses ben Israel) Isserles is known from the acronym of his name. Isserles (1520—1572) was born and died in Cracow, Poland. He came from a well to do rabbinic family and was able to devote his life to learning. The words *Shúlkhon órukh* mean “prepared table.” The name *Mápo* (“tablecloth” for Karo’s “prepared table”) came to be widened in popular usage from one of the Ramó’s works to all his commentaries on Karo. And, in popular Ashkenazic terminology, the name *Shúlkhon órukh* came to apply to Karo’s *plus* the Ramó’s works taken together, even as *Gemóra* (see above p. 32) came to apply to the Mishna *plus* the *Gemóra* in popular usage.

The age of the Sephardi Joseph Karo, and the Ashkenazi Isserles — the Ramó — came to be seen in rabbinic history as the beginning of a new era in traditional Jewish intellectual history. The scholars before these two masters are called the *Rishóynim* (*Rishonim*, literally “the early ones” or “the first ones”). Although chronologists of European Jewish culture differ on details, it is generally accepted that Karo and the Ramó are, taken together, the launchers of the age of the *Akhróynim* (*Aharonim*, literally “the last ones” or “the latter ones”).

The *Akhróynim* in Poland, those who came after the Ramó, took after “the founding father of Talmudic studies in Poland,” Yankev Polak (1460s—1530). Polak and a large number of Polish rabbis who came after him from the sixteenth

century onward followed his method of Talmudic research called “pilpul” (*pípl* in Yiddish, *pilpúl* in modern Hebrew). The concept is much older but it took on a new meaning in Poland. It is a method of explaining away contradictions, unclear texts and logical, historical, conceptual and textual problems of all sorts by . . . To a supporter of pilpul, the three dots would be filled in by “brilliance,” or “originality” or perhaps “the study of logics and creative thinking.” To its detractors, the dots would be filled in by “casuistry” or “forced analysis” or even “study for the sake of showing off cleverness.” Both sides concede that there are many variations of pilpul, some involving more fanciful flights of logic or imagination than others. To be sure, pilpul breathed new life into Talmudic studies in Poland, and enabled the rise of many yeshivas where the main point of a day’s work was to come up with a novel interpretation whether or not it is particularly likely (or even intended to be) historically accurate in the sense of achieving comprehension of the original intention of a text.

How does Lithuania fit into all of this? In at least three major ways.

First, internal societal forces within Lithuanian Jewry had for some generations been aspiring to develop Talmudic scholarship in the country. For wealthier members of communities, and for communities with means, a tradition was well established by the sixteenth century whereby communities would “bring” top scholars from Germany and Poland to come and settle in Lithuania to teach and head Jewish communities,

and to study and write. The everyday Yiddish verb *léren* came to mean both “teach” and “study” and especially to be immersed in the study of Torah.

This process is illustrated for a representative selection of these scholars in the map “Rise of Lithuania as the World Center of Rabbinic Scholarship” (p. 64). It is evident that notwithstanding the role played by a number of communities, it was one community in particular that was “importing” Talmudic scholars in the same spirit in which other societies have imported artisans and entrepreneurs or gold and silver. That community was the city of Vilna.

Second, the method of *pilpul* was revered in Lithuania but not, usually, as the prime method for Talmudic study, and certainly not as a means of solving serious problems of law. It was revered as an oratorical art, to be practiced for fun, and particularly by *magidim* (traveling preachers), as a means of delighting their audiences. When it came to hard core scholarship, the emerging Lithuanian type scholar was straight and unyielding in searching for the *actual* meaning of a text, and for “solving” contradictions in ancient texts only so far as logic would allow, and admitting ignorance beyond that point. This tendency fed into East European Jewish folklore, as types of scholars came to represent their people in the popular psyche. While the Polish Jew appears as warm, excitable, loving of a “nice” explanation that has charm, the Lithuanian Jew — eventually known as a Litvak — comes across as somewhat dry, over concerned with facts, truths and always demanding evi-

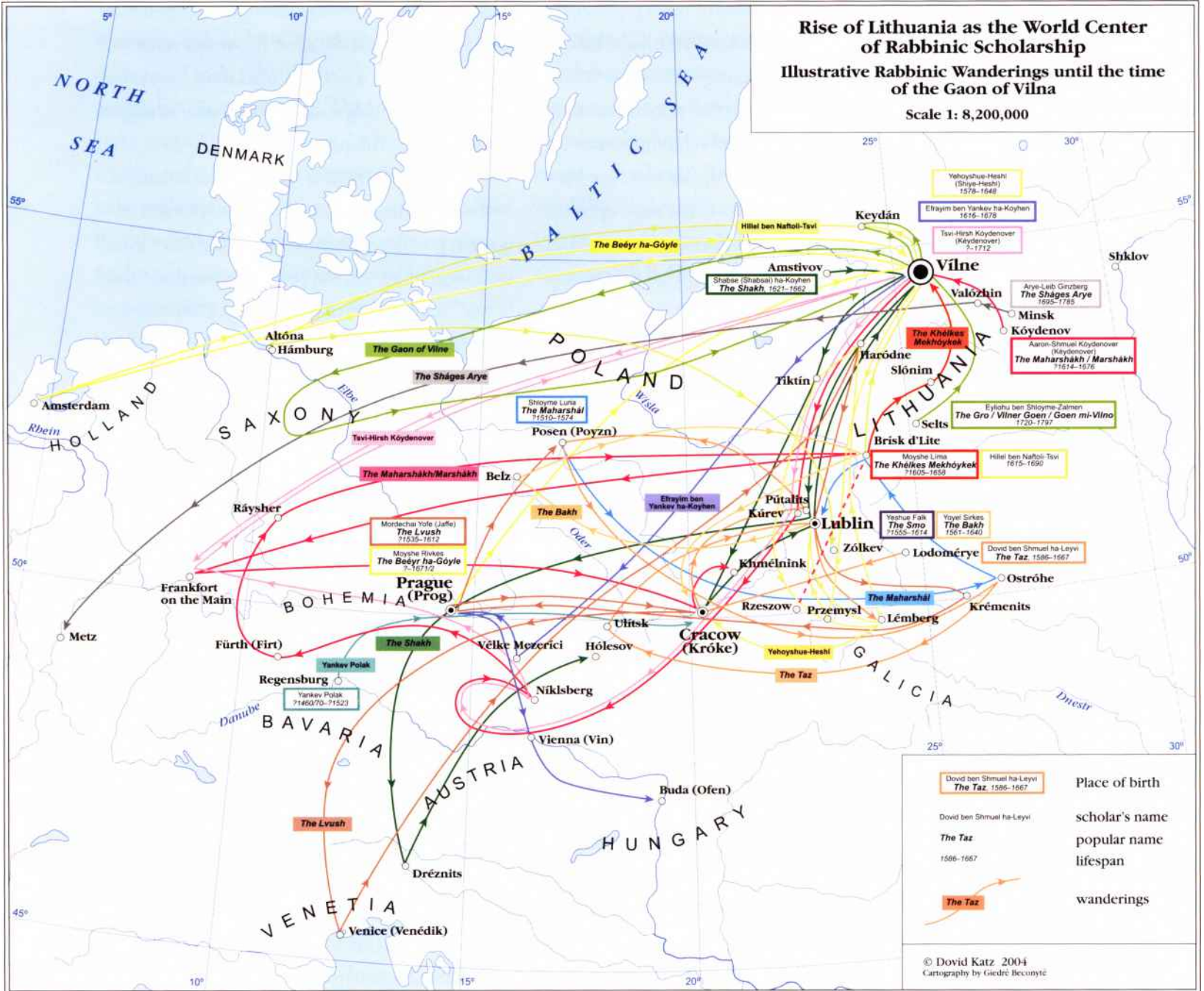
dence. In many a Yiddish folktale, the Litvak doesn’t believe something until he sees all the evidence for himself. This in turn fed into yet another folkloristic differentiation: that the Polish Jew (*der Póylisher yid*) is depicted as having deeper belief in God and every last detail of his or her religion, while the Litvak, a born skeptic, must always be convinced with a big stack of what moderns might call empirical evidence.

Finally, there was the external situation. Notwithstanding setbacks in societal tolerance toward its Jewish population (such as the short-lived expulsion of 1495), the Jews continued to “feel better” in Lithuania than in Poland. Christian vehemence against Jews was much less prevalent in Lithuania (despite some tragic incidents, mostly involving the Jesuits and the kinds of outbursts known as *shilergelaf*, or rampages of theological students). Jews (and this also fed into Yiddish folklore) were poorer, by and large, in Lithuania and there was less resentment against them. Another factor is that Lithuania was more of a multiethnic society than Poland. These differences persisted in myriad ways notwithstanding the major political changes brought about by the various unions between the two nations (the marriage of Lithuanian Grand Duke Jogaila to Queen Jadwiga of Poland in 1386; the Union of Lublin federating the two states in 1569 into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; the Union of Brest-Litovsk in 1596 attempting to unite the Catholic and Orthodox churches, and the late eighteenth century partitions which put all of Lithuanian and much of Polish Jewry under the same Russian czarist rule).

Rise of Lithuania as the World Center of Rabbinic Scholarship

Illustrative Rabbinic Wanderings until the time of the Gaon of Vilna

Scale 1: 8,200,000



Symbol	Meaning
Dovid ben Shmuel ha-Leyvi The Taz 1586-1667	Place of birth
Dovid ben Shmuel ha-Leyvi	scholar's name
The Taz	popular name
1586-1667	lifespan
→	wanderings

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Cartography by Giedrė Beconyte

A Scholarly Tradition is Established in Lithuania. . .



"The Shakh" (Yiddish *der Shakh*)
is the popular name of Shabse
(Shabsai) ben Meir ha-Koyhen

Major features of the intellectual makeup of classic Lithuanian Jewish culture can be found in the works of seventeenth century rabbinic scholars.

"The Shakh" (Yiddish *der Shakh*) is the popular name of Shabse (Shabsai) ben Meir ha-Koyhen, one of the first generation of Lithuanian born-and-bred "international masters" of Talmudic learning. His life and work are a microcosm of the rise of Lithuania to the status of world center of traditional Jewish learning. He is known by an acronym deriving from his first work, a legal commentary called *Sifsey Koyhen* (literally "Lips of the Kohen [priest]"), a play on his own family status as a member of the first (priestly) caste of the three ancient groups into which Jews traditionally fall (Priest, Levite and Israelite). As

is so frequently the case, the name of his book and the reference to himself are both taken from a biblical passage, in this case from the last of the Hebrew prophets, Malachi: "For the lips of the priest should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts" (Malachi 2: 7).

There is uncertainty as to whether the Shakh was born in Vilna or in Amstivov near Vilkovishik. In either case he hails from the depths of Jewish Lithuania, studied in Tiktin and went on to Poland to teach and continue studying before settling in Vilna and becoming a member of its rabbinical court. He fled during the war of 1655, and after stints in Lublin, Prague and Dresnitz, settled in Holesov, Moravia, where he died in 1663. There, incidentally, he befriended Christian scholars in what was becoming an ecumenical spirit between Lithuanian Talmudists and certain tolerant Christian scholars.

In the yeshivas of the world today, every student is immersed in debates “between the Shakh and the Taz.” The Taz was a contemporary with whom the Shakh disagreed on many points of law and interpretation. The major works of both are commentaries on the *Shulkhon orakh* code of law by Joseph Karo (1488—1575). The Taz too was named for the commentary he wrote, *Turey Zohov* (“Columns of Gold”), a play on several Biblical passages referring to the columns (or rows) of various building materials for Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings, chapters 6 and 7). In the name of the commentary, which then became the popular name of its author, the transposed reference is to columns of print in the texts of the commentaries. It is a classic case of semantic refashioning of building blocks of houses to building columns of print that symbolize intellectual structures.

And so, in the world of yeshivas to this day, and for all time, the Taz and the Shakh have it out with each other in their numberless legal and logical and textual debates. The Taz by the way was “in real life” Dovid ben Shmuel ha-Leyvi (1586—1667), a Ukrainian Talmudist, who like his opponent moved westward in troubled times. In the end, it was the rulings of the Litvak, the Shakh, that were usually accepted in Lithuania and Poland, and those of the southerner, the Taz, that prevailed in German Jewish circles. Nevertheless, each legal instance, and the opinions of each within a long chain of scholars (that now extends centuries beyond both), continues to be examined in its own right.

The story of “the Shakh and the Taz” can illuminate the “soul of the Litvak,” and particularly the element therein variously known (depending on the perspective of the beholder) as argumentativeness, passion for debating, intellectual challenge for its own sake, and fearlessness in disagreeing with even great authorities. For the anti-Litvak, so to speak (as in non-Litvak Jewish folklore), all this was sometimes considered an egocentric exercise in flaunting intellectual prowess and belittling an opponent. It is curious that in the introduction to his replies-to-replies commentary on the Taz, the Shakh wrote:

“It should not occur to the reader of this book of mine, that it is because of some personal dispute I may have had with the author of the *Turey Zohov* [the Taz], or some grudge against him in my heart that I proceeded to write critiques on his book. For it is after all known to everybody that the relationship between us is that of ‘Vaheb in Suphah’ [from an obscure passage, Numbers 21: 14, interpreted by the Babylonian Talmud, at Kidushin 30b as the love between two who study at the same gate of Torah]. ‘And the Torah seeks its home’ [Babylonian Talmud, Bovo-Metsiyo 85a], and I proceeded to make my home into a home for the author of the *Turey Zohov*, and he stayed with me for three

days, and I honored him with great honor, so great that it would be hard to believe, and he reveled in this honor, and rejoiced with me in great joy, literally like the joy of the Rejoicing at the Libation Water Well [Mishna Suko 5:1]. And as far as concerns God he knows that I wrote this book, the *Nekudoys ha-Kesef* [‘Studs of Silver’ — Song of Songs 1: 11], only for the sake of Heaven, to explain and to clarify the truth. . .”

from the introduction to *Nekudoys ha-Kesef* [reply to the *Taz*, among the commentaries of both upon the *Shulkhon orukh* code of Jewish law], Frankfurt on the Oder, 1677

The Shakh’s other accomplishments are also “literary” within the context of traditional Ashkenaz, not in the sense of the “western genres” of prose, poetry or drama. In addition to his extensive legal commentaries, he wrote some treatises that are more in the realm of logic and the methodology of intellectual research, most famously on doubt and on the unknowables in life and in law.



Shy. Matsyohu Strashun Collection

A profound book of Jewish philosophy by a
 “young man from The States of Lithuania”
 (published in Prague in 1611)

All that is known about Yoysef ben Yitskhok ha-Leyvi Segal is what the publisher writes about him on the title page of this short book that appeared in Prague in 1611: that he is “from The States of Lithuania” and that he is “a master of wisdom, and young in years.” The book offers a profound critique of medieval Jewish philosophy, including that of Maimonides. This Litvak moved west and became acquainted with leading Jewish scholars in Prague whom he introduced to philosophy. In the book the young Litvak boldly declares that Talmudic law is not enough to make a scholar whole. It is necessary to delve into wider issues of philosophy. Although he has deep respect for Maimonides he does not hesitate to challenge the proofs he proposed for the existence of God.



Title page and frontispiece of a 1661 commentary by an ancestor of the Gaon of Vilna



Bodleian Library Oxford

Title page of the Amsterdam 1661 edition of Joseph Karo's legal compendium *Shulkhon orukh* with the commentary by Moyshe Rivkes of Vilna, an ancestor of the Gaon. The frontispiece contains the kind of imagery (borrowed from Christian books) beloved of Amsterdam Jewish publishers and rarely found in East European Jewish editions. Moyshe Rivkes' textual and legal commentary is called *B'Éyr ha-Góyle* ("Well of the Exile" or *B'Éyr ha-Góyle* "Well of the Exiled One").

Rivkes, who was born around 1595, and brought up in Vilna (his birthplace is disputed), was one of those expelled from Lithuania (along with the Shakh) in 1655 during the invasion of Vilna by Muscovite and Cossack forces. He

eventually reached Amsterdam where the well established Sephardic community marveled at his erudition, and commissioned him to proof-read and prepare for the press a new edition of the *Shulkhon orukh* code of Jewish law. Rivkes went much further, writing a commentary that has become classic, and that is reprinted with all standard modern editions of the *Shulkhon orukh*. The comments offered are extraordinarily brief and brevity became another "classic Litvak trait."

At more than one point, Rivkes stresses the absolute need for respect, good relations and meticulous honesty in all dealings between Jews and Christians.

Despite his good life in Amsterdam, Moyshe Rivkes yearned for his native Vilna and returned home. He died in Vilna in 1671. He left his life's earnings to be invested in a trust fund, with instructions that it was to be used in the future to support such descendants as may be true Torah scholars. One of those direct descendants was Eyliohe the Gaon of Vilna (see *Genealogy of the Gaon of Vilna*, p. 87), who was able to devote his entire life to study, thanks to Moyshe Rivkes' legacy.



Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

The rabbinic tract by Yehude-Leyb Pukhovitser (published in Hamburg in 1692)

The rabbinic tract *Seyfer Divrey Khakhomim* (“Book of the Words of the Wise Men”) by “Yehude-Leyb, may God watch over him, Pukhovitser, whose permanent residence is in the place of his birth, a place of Torah, the sacred community of Pinsk, may God watch over it and keep it.” It was published in Hamburg in 1692. The title page of this copy, in the Yivo Library in New York, bears the famous stamp of the collection of the nineteenth century Vilna scholar and bibliophile Matisyohu Strashun (see p. 188).

Pukhovitser’s family stemmed from the village Pukhovitsh, east of Minsk (now Puchavičy, Belarus). Although his works show profound kabbalistic influence, their essence is legal and homiletic, with a practical eye toward application of ancient laws to the realities of the author’s time, which included the Chmielnitski massacres of 1648 and 1649.

Pukhovitser (± 1630—170?) was a forerunner of the academic traditions of Lithuanian Jewish culture, setting out principles that were later to be associated with the Gaon of Vilna (1720—1790), his pupil Chaim of Valozhin (1749—1821) and the

yeshiva network that followed. He insisted on the study of Torah (in other words of the entire rabbinic literature) for its own sake, not just for practical reasons. At the same time, he called for systematization of the study process, including set times and development of a curriculum that progresses from the easy to the more difficult. He condemned the playful logic called *pilpul*, very popular in Poland, and insisted that a scholarship system be instituted to enable poor students to study based on their academic merit only. The overt Lithuanian Jewish antagonism toward *pilpul* is sometimes traced to Pukhovitser.



Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

The kabbalistic tract *Or Yisroel* (“Light of Israel”) by “Yisroel [Israel], son of Rabbi Aaron of blessed memory Yofe [Jaffe], head of the rabbinical court and head of the academy of the sacred community of Shklov in the Land of Russia.” It was published in Frankfurt on the Oder in 1702.

Born in the Ukraine around 1640, Yofe was taken north to Glusk (now in Belarus), in the Jewish Lithuanian area, as a boy, in 1648, when the family escaped the Chmielnitski hordes. He eventually became rabbi of Shklov. This tract is divided into two commentaries, one on Kabbalah, one on a code of law. The author vehemently denied charges that he was secretly a believer in the false messiah of Sabbethai Zevi. That dispute, which centered on whether certain insertions in the text were his own or were maliciously inserted at the print shop, makes this one of the most controversial kabbalistic works.



Mystical tract by a scholar from Shklov
(published in Frankfurt on the Oder in 1702)

The beloved ethical, kabbalistic and story-rich tract *Kav ha-Yósher* (Ashkenazic: *Kav ha-Yoshor*, The Straightforward [Honest] Measure) by Tsvi-Hirsh Keydenover (or Koydenover). Originally published in Frankfurt on the Main in 1705 in Hebrew, the work had been written earlier in the author’s home town, Vilna. In 1709, he published his Yiddish version. It became a popular work, and bilingual editions have appeared ever since, with the traditional layout of Hebrew in the top and Yiddish in the lower half of each page. This facsimile is of the Vilna 1875 bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish edition, one of many published by the Romms of Vilna in the nineteenth century. The accompanying facsimile (to the left) is a sample page from within the text.

The book’s name, *Kav ha-Yoshor* is a playful multilayered construction of a type beloved of traditional rabbis. *Kav*, in addition to being an ancient measure, used here meta-



Menke Katz Collection

A later 19th century Vilna edition
of the beloved *Kav ha-Yósher*



Menke Katz Collection

Kabbalistic table of mystic names
in the *Kav ha-Yósher*

phorically for the measure of justice, also equals 102 in the Hebrew numbering system, a mark for the book's 102 chapters. Moreover, the letters of the word *ha-yoshor* ("straightforward, honest, upstanding") are the same as those of the author's Yiddish forename, Hirsh, but with the order of two letters reversed.

Keydenover (who died in 1712) was the son of Aaron Shmuel Keydenover (\pm 1614—1676), a Talmudist and preacher who hailed from Keydenov (or Koydenov), now Dziarżynsk in Belarus.



The Talmudic and astronomical tract *Yeshua be-Yisroel* ("Salvation in Israel") by "The Torah scholar and astronomer, our teacher, the rabbi Rabbi Yehoynoson [Jonathan] son of our teacher, the rabbi Rabbi Yoysel [Joseph] from the sacred community of Rozhenoy of the Land of Lithuania" (published Frankfurt on the Main, 1720).

Rozhenoy, where the author was born in the late seventeenth century, is also known as Ruzhan; it is between Pinsk and Grodna (now Ružany, Belarus). Jonathan, who was blind, made a vow during a plague in town in 1710, that should he be spared, he would devote his life to astronomy. And he did. This tract is a commentary on a work by Maimonides (1135—1204) concerning the intricate laws of blessing the new moon each month, and exploring more generally the interface between Talmudic (mainly calendric) studies and astronomy.

The fusing of Jewish and secular learning was a Lithuanian Jewish passion long before the nineteenth century spread of East European Haskalah. And, during his travels in Germany, Jonathan befriended the famous Christian bibliographer of Hebrew books, Johann Christoph Wolf (1683—1739).



Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

The Talmudic and astronomical tract *Yeshua be-Yisroel* (Salvation in Israel) appeared in 1720

Chapter 5

The Council of Lithuania

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the governments of both Poland and Lithuania granted their Jewish communities autonomy for the purposes of tax collection. In other words, the organized Jewish community itself would be responsible for raising the lump sums required, rather than the government having to deal with collections from large numbers of individuals or families.

Heads of individual communities, large and small, had to meet to hammer out policies. This simple piece of common sense went hand in hand with religious, cultural and, to a great extent, juridical autonomy. The Jewish *councils*, with government blessing, could also take formal control of many aspects of internal Jewish life, including (to use the modern terms, and why not) education, social services, and law (dealing with disputes and matters arising). This meant they had a lot of power, given that the formal community, after giving the state the total amount owed, could decide on the disbursement of remaining funds, and could serve as an authoritative institution for channeling to good works many private funds, en-

dowments and personal legacies. It also meant that chunks of Talmudic law that had in reality *never* been in force (bearing in mind that the Talmud wasn't even dreamt of during the ancient Jewish sovereignty in Judah or Israel) were suddenly in *full* force in Poland and Lithuania!

And so, for the first time since the fall of Jerusalem, the Jews had control over their own affairs without having (or wanting) sovereignty or police or armies (those aspects of security being part of the government's part of the bargain).

There is no use pretending that things worked perfectly. The historical works on the subject deal with the many shortfalls and conflicts, and the various external ills (like wars) that the council system could neither prevent nor repair. Nevertheless, this period of Jewish autonomy in Poland and Lithuania is considered a Golden Age for both Polish and Lithuanian Jewry, and in fact, for Diaspora Jewry in general. It was a period when both countries' Jewish communities produced many leading scholars and works, a level of widespread creativity that is possible only when the external environment and general atmosphere

permit (as opposed to isolated individual genius, which sometimes thrives in adversity).

But it was also a time that included an immense Jewish tragedy. The Chmielnitski uprisings of the Ukrainian peasants against their Polish lords and Jewish middlemen and leaseholders and innkeepers turned into an orgy of mass murder of Ukrainian Jewish and Polish men, women and children. The calamity is known in Yiddish as *Gzéryes takh-v'tat* (the Evil Decrees of 1648 and 1649). This led the councils of the surviving communities in Lithuania and Poland to deal with many issues ensuing from the Ukrainian massacres (intake of refugees, ransoming of captives, and so forth). Still, the major focus is on the territories covered, and the various seventeenth century wars only temporarily disrupted the work of the councils, which tended to hold assemblies in different towns in rotation.

The pioneering research on the Councils was carried out by the great Jewish historian Simon Dubnov (1860—1941; see p. 280). In 1925 he published the complete text (in Hebrew with various terms in Aramaic and in Yiddish) of the proceedings of the Council of Lithuania. Israel Halperin (1910—1971), a native of Bialystok who emigrated to Israel, published addenda in 1935, and went on to publish the extant proceedings of the other councils in 1945. Much of what follows comes from the publication of these two scholars who made the proceedings of the councils widely and permanently available. These collections of real life proceedings paint a vivid picture of a stateless people who nevertheless have a

highly sophisticated and meticulous code of internal law rooted in their ancient culture, and are able to enforce it in everyday life thanks to the autonomy granted by the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania.

The base unit of each town or place is the *kóhol* (*kahal*), the organized Jewish community in each town, which itself has a structure of titles and positions dating back to the early years of the long Jewish exile. Another term of the same root, *kehíle*, can be synonymous or it can be wider in referring to a place of Jewish township residence. For example, one can speak of “the *kehíles* Brisk, Grodna and Vilna” where the reference is to the cities, and specifically to their Jewish communities, and more specifically, to the organized communal structure of those communities.

The nucleus of a Jewish autonomy in Poland and Lithuania that would be wider than any one community evolved with the practice of periodic meetings of the heads of various communities of a region or more than one region. It is an example of the close “practical life” relationships between Jewish and “general” life that such meetings often took place at the great commercial fairs which provided many business contacts. They also served as a convenient time to convene rabbinical courts comprised of top scholars from farflung locations (and to make marital matches).

The major legal “tool” is the *takóne* (Ashkenazic *takono*, Israeli Hebrew *takaná*, variously translated “ruling” or “amendment”). The *takónes* of a community were usually written by the scribe (the *sóyfer*) in a special *pínkes* (*pinkos*,



The Council of the Lands
Scale 1: 5,700,000

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| Borders in 1764 | ● VILNE Capitals of states | PINSK Principal Lithuanian Jewish Cities |
| --- State borders | ⊙ TROK Centers of districts in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania | ● Designated meeting places of the Jewish Council of Lithuania |
| --- Borders of Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth | ⊙ KOVNE | |

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Cartography by Giedrė Beconytė
After Chaim Eitan/Dov Levin

pinkas) or record book, and on rare occasions even printed. A surviving *pinkes* is invariably a treasure of information on the daily life of a community of centuries ago. They arose in response to issues and situations that actually arose, making them an infinitely better source of history than reconstructions based on the official government documents of the day.

These developments came, not coincidentally, at the same time that the dynamic cultural center of Ashkenazic civilization had moved from the Germanic speaking lands to Eastern Europe, where its first great center was in Poland. The councils began around 1519. The government's tax demands on the Jews resulted in the heads of communities meeting, often at the great fair of Lublin. Sometimes the courts convened at the Lublin fairs acted as a court of appeal to which a party dissatisfied with a local verdict could apply for relief. Dubnov estimates the period of evolution of the *Váad*, or Council, as the half century between 1530 and 1580. During that period the term *Vaadey hoarótses* ("The Councils of the Lands") emerges to describe the committees and convocations of community leaders from various parts of Poland and Lithuania. A region could be referred to as *glil* (region, province), *érets* (land), or *medíne* (country or state).

In a document dated 1533, King Sigismund I of Poland makes mention of a specific ruling of the court assembled at Lublin as if it were a recognized supreme court of Jewish law and arbitration. An example to demonstrate the authority of the *Váad*: In the sixteenth century the lead-

ing rabbinic authorities of the constituent "lands" gave their approval for an authorized edition of the Talmud to be published at Lublin (1559—1580). The formal text of the *haskóme* ("approbation") is printed at the start of the edition, and the *Váad* decreed that it become the standard in schools and yeshivas throughout the lands.

Which are the "lands"? During much of the sixteenth century there is variation in the enumeration of the constituents. Sometimes it is the Council of Three Lands (Poland, Lithuania, Belorussia), and sometimes the Council of Five Lands (Great Poland, Little Poland, Lithuania, Belorussia and Volhynia).

During this period of flux one can observe a certain eastward shift of rabbinic authority that continues, as noted in the previous chapter, the west-to-east history of Ashkenaz, starting in the Rhineland and heading for the Danube, and then for the Vistula, and in the northern (Lithuanian) sector, the Viliya, the Nyeman and the Dnieper.

Early in the sixteenth century, the city whose name had the most "magic" for Jewish learning was perhaps Lublin; another candidate might be Cracow. By the end of the century, Brisk (Brest), Grodna and increasingly, Vilna, were the phonetic forms assumed for that same rarified feel.

In the general history of the mid and late sixteenth century in the region, the key event is the Union of Lublin of 1569, which brought Poland and Lithuania into federation as a single state, albeit with formally distinct laws, armies, treasury and administration. One of the motivations was the desirability of a common front

against Muscovy. The Livonian War, launched by Russia's Ivan IV in 1558 (over lands now in Latvia and Estonia), dragged on for nearly a quarter of a century, and the ultimate Russian defeat was due in no small measure to Polish-Lithuanian unity (despite Poland's having annexed Podlasie and Volhynia, which had previously belonged to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania).

In Jewish history this is a period of the solidification of the consciousness of Lithuanian Jewry as a distinct entity in its own right. References to community leaders gathering for assemblies of Lithuanian Jewry as such are referred to from 1533. The phrases "elected from all Lithuania" and "of all the communities in Lithuania" indicate a growing desire of the spiritual leaders of Lithuanian Jewry to consider themselves and to be considered an entity apart.

Whether the *Váad* is referred to as the council of three, of four or of five "Lands," Lithuania was almost invariably counted as one of them starting in the early sixteenth century. And, given that the delegates from Lithuania had the same status as those from the other lands, the notion of *Lita* or *Medinoys Lito* (States of Lithuania) the terms used throughout this period, were well established.

However, the rabbinic leaders of Lithuania decided to break away and have their own separate council. Given the dramatic growth of Torah scholarship in Lithuania in that period, this gave the Litvaks, far fewer in number, an aura of equality to "all the other lands put together." For much of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the

configuration is of the "Council of the Lands" and — the "Council of Lithuania."

In 1623, the Jewish leadership of Lithuania broke away from the Council of the Lands, and established its own council, *Váad Medinas Lite* (Council of the Land of Lithuania), which also used a fuller name, *Váad hakehiloys horóshiyoy bimdinas Lite* ("Council of the main communities of the Land of Lithuania"). It was sometimes referred to simply as *Váad hamdine* ("Council of the Land").

The name of the Polish (or "southern") *Váad* crystallized as *Váad árba arótses* or Council of Four Lands, the four lands being Great Poland (principal city: Posen), Little Poland (Cracow), Galicia (Lemberg) and Volhynia (Kremenits or Ostrog).

Why did the Lithuanian Jews — the Litvaks — break away and set up their own central autonomous authority? There were no modern day social scientists studying these things then, but the very different Yiddish (and Hebrew and Aramaic) dialects were no doubt supplemented by ever more differences in Jewish law and lore, as a detailed study of the rabbinic documents of the period reveals. And, as always in the history of breakaways, there are triggers and last straws that serve as the ostensible "excuse."

For a long time, the "head tax" was assessed upon individuals by the Jewish communities themselves. The government simply set the total amount for the community as a whole, and left it to the autonomous Jewish communities to collect the required sum. In 1613, Sigismund III ordered separate assessments for the Jews of

Lithuania and of Poland. That, and the growth of Lithuanian Jewry in numbers, stature and scholarship, were contributory factors to the Lithuanian Jewish leadership's view that *Lita* needed its own council. Beyond that (and maybe even crucially), there were a number of cases in pre-1623 councils in which the Lithuanian delegates dissented from the majority. The progress of cultural history was clearly paving the way for a distinct Lithuanian Council as a function of an unwritten and more gradually evolving development: the evolution of the *Litvak* as a member of a group that sees itself as distinct from the coreligionists "down south."

The 1623 establishment of the separate Council of Lithuania had been presaged by the Lithuanian Jews' custom of holding preliminary meetings among themselves in Brisk d'Lite (Brest Litovsk, now Brest, Belarus), where the plan for a breakaway was apparently hatched. Lithuanian Jewry always numbered far less than the Jews of Poland, although "cultural weight" (productivity disproportionate to numbers) has often obscured the figures. The figures are in both cases probably undercounts for many reasons. The census of 1766 counted 157,520 Jews in Lithuania (using the then borders of the Grand Duchy within the Union, of course), and 454,625 in Poland.

The first congress of the newly conceived *Vaad Lite*, the Council of Lithuania, convened in Brisk on September 4th 1623. Its participants were the heads of the Jewish communities of three Lithuanian cities: Brisk, Grodna (Yiddish *Haródne*) and Pinsk. Some fifty smaller towns

were "attached" to them as satellite communities that were subject to the rulings of the "principal cities" in matters of Jewish law. They immediately issued about one hundred *takónes* covering many aspects of Jewish life from the need for equitable tax collection to matters of law, religion, education and social services. Thirty communities were allotted to Brisk, seven to Grodna, eight to Pinsk. The Council established a Jewish High Court and Jewish legislature, both of which survived for close to one hundred and forty years, until the period immediately preceding the partitions of Poland-Lithuania in the eighteenth century.

From its inception in 1623 until 1652, Brisk, Grodna and Pinsk remained the only "principal cities" of the Council of Lithuania. In 1653 the representatives of Vilna demanded the same status. It was granted on an incremental basis: that there would immediately be one community leader from Vilna as representative of a principal community; and after eight years — a second. It was only in 1670 that the Vilnaites acquired their third seat. In 1687 they demanded to have a conference *sóyfer* (scribe) and *shámes* (servitor or assistant) just like the other communities. The record book records the plea made at a meeting of the Council in Zabłudov:

"Moreover today the leaders, princes, principals, benefactors and heads of the province from the sacred community of Vilna, may God guard and redeem her, made their petition before us, as to why their force is diminished, insofar as they do not have in the assembly of the land a scribe and servitor as do the other chiefs of principal cities, for they are equal in every respect to all

the principal communities, and in our view their words are just and pleasant for a beautiful community such as they are, that is famous among the dispersions for great splendor, honor and magnificence. [...] At the first meeting of the *Váad* that will be held Please God straightaway following the *Váad* of the present time, the month of Tamuz [5]447 [= June/July 1687] they will have a scribe and servitor, and the choice of them will be for the princes of the sacred community of Vilna to choose [...] equal in every respect to the scribe and servitor of the other heads of principal communities with absolutely no diminution. And after the first congress, mentioned above, at all congresses of the land that will be convened, forever, the sacred community of Vilna will have its own scribe and servitor without any doubt whatsoever [...] Hereby enacted with full force by Act of the Land and in good will [...].”

The last of the “principal cities” of Jewish Lithuania of the time, Slutsk (now in Belarus), was added in 1691. This was in effect a declaration of rabbinic juridical independence of Slutsk from the authorities in Brisk. The proclamation includes the assertion: “All the heads of the leaders of the four sacred principal cities [Brisk, Grodna, Pinsk, Vilna] are agreed, in full assembly of our country, may God watch over it and preserve her, to give of their honor to the adornment, as befits them, in a garland of splendor, for the heads of the leaders and the princes of the sacred community of Slutsk, to be the Fifth Principal City in our Land of Lithuania, may God watch over and preserve her.” The modern observer will note the absence among the “principal cities” of any in Zámet, or western Lithuania, though there

is much about individual communities in the region and the region generally.

Many of the debates and the resulting rulings of *Váad Lite* concern the details of economic life and the inter-community politics of the day. These are of value to historians of the period, and have been studied extensively. For us, the question is, what does the text of the surviving *Pinkes*, the Record Book of the Land of Lithuania, reveal about Lithuanian Jewish culture?

Following in the steps of the American social historian Abraham Cronbach (1882—1965), we find that much can be gleaned from the *Pinkes* about the internal, social, spiritual and cultural life of Lithuanian Jewry. It is a window into traditional Lithuanian Jewish society. When Lithuania’s Jewish communities had a representative body comprising delegates from all corners of the land, and when they had the power to legislate regarding the uses of community funds, what did they decide to do with those funds in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? And, completely apart from the expenditure of community funds are questions of everyday life. Where the Council of Lithuania could legislate on personal and community conduct, over and above the laws of the traditional Jewish legal code, and supplementary to the secular non-Jewish law of the land, what did they choose to do?

There are long lists of expensive garments and materials that are forbidden because they are ostentatious and designed to show off wealth. These laws are conceptually linked to various forms of aid to the poor. For example, communities are

instructed to give dowries for poor brides consisting of up to ten Lithuanian *shok* which can be added to, in various amounts, by relatives. To qualify there must be testimony that the candidate bride did not dress in expensive clothes to show herself off. Recipients are chosen by lot from among the oldest brides-to-be in each area. Those not chosen are to receive automatically a community dowry the following year. Each region has to report on the recipients and their qualifications. These “qualifications” include a number of details, among them, that the girls in question do not wear golden ornaments or silk dresses.

A certain interface between the issue of ostentatiousness and care for the poor can be seen in the following amendment about family celebrations of weddings, circumcisions, and so forth:

“And therefore let it be recorded in the *Pinkes* of the Land to minimize when organizing celebrations as far as possible. We furthermore agree on the following [...] that in every prayer quorum [comprising ten men] there must be two poor people” [§603, at Khomsk, 1667].

The Litvak of Yiddish folklore and of the collective memory of survivors today, is likewise a somewhat austere person who dresses simply and avoids any kind of showing off in clothing, jewelry, wealth or personal accessories. He or she stands in contrast to the well-dressed well-groomed southerner (Polish, Galician or Ukrainian Jew) in Yiddish folklore.

But the major attribute of Lithuanian Jewish society is, in one word: learning. The universalization of education runs through the pages of the *Pinkes* like the plot line of a novel. Some samples follow.

“And the heads of communities are obligated to observe and be vigilant that in the surrounding regions heads of yeshiva are employed who will take in young students and children to the greatest extent possible. And now [1623] when there is a plague in Poland, they shall see to send pupils to [our] small settlements even where there is no head of yeshiva as long as there are householders who can teach them. And so shall it be when there is a war in the lands of Poland” [§46, at Brisk, 1623].

“And the yeshiva students must teach the elementary school pupils for free from the fifteenth of the month of Shvat [falls in January/February] until the first of Nisan [Nisan, falls in March/April], and from the fifteenth of Ov [Av, July/August] until the middle of Elul [August/September]. And the financial warden shall not pay out the scholarship until such time as they have agreed to teach the elementary students. The financial warden shall ask the elementary students questions to test them on their learning” [§354, Lublin, 1639].

The same meeting decided that a portion of the funds given by a benefactor should go to “teach writing to children from poor families as stipulated in his will” [§401].

“There are some communities and small settlements where there are rabbis who have the opportunity, but nevertheless do not keep yeshivas [...] We have therefore resolved: Every community and settlement that has a head of a rabbinical court is obligated to keep a yeshiva with its yeshiva students and pupils, to provide them with a scholarship or to arrange for them to eat at the private homes even during the weekdays [...] And the number of yeshiva students and pupils in every community and settlement shall be calculated as follows: for every ten taxpaying heads of household listed in the re-

gister, the requirement shall be one yeshiva student and two pupils. And if in the eyes of the heads of the rabbinical court, may God preserve and save it, it shall seem that any community or their regional smaller settlements are able to take more, they may add to the required number as they see fit. And likewise, any community or smaller settlement that has a rabbi, if there are fifty taxpayers or more listed in the register, they must support yeshiva students and pupils as noted above. [...] And if it shall seem in the eyes of the heads of the rabbinical court (may God watch over and save it), that any community or smaller settlement should take upon themselves a rabbi or teacher, they have the authority to compel them to do so. Moreover, the leaders of each community and settlement which keeps yeshiva students and pupils as noted above are obligated to go further, and to acquire at their expense Gemoras [copies of single tractates of the Talmud] and commentaries according to the number of students; and they shall be vigilant as to how and what to achieve for the necessary sum for the needed acquisition of Gemoras. Moreover, every community that counts a quorum [of ten] householders is obligated to do more and ensure a permanent school teacher [...] [§528, at Selts near Brisk, 1662].

“And every head of a rabbinical court together with the rabbi and teacher must monitor and pay attention to the surrounding regions and provinces, and to small as well as to larger communities [...] to keep yeshiva students and elementary pupils [...], and where this is not within their capacity [...] they must at least maintain a studyhouse” [§590, Khomsk, 1667].

“And in a place where no rabbi is to be found, the word must be decreed upon that community that they should keep with them some scholar who is proficient in

Torah, and who has the attributes of Godfearingness, to study and to teach their children and to guide them in the right path” [§738, at Khomsk, 1679].

“To maintain yeshivas in all communities to disseminate knowledge among the people of Israel, the head of the community shall keep not less than five householders and eight yeshiva students and five assistants. And the head of the rabbinical court of the head of the community shall monitor the smaller settlements, where there is a head of a rabbinical court, that they shall maintain a yeshiva, according to his judgment” [§911, at Amdur (now Indura, Belarus), 1720].

Another enactment of the time characterizes the period of the transition of Jewish Lithuania from a country which attracted top Talmudic talents from abroad (through the sixteenth century) to one which produced them internally, thereby making for the rise of Lithuania as the world center of Talmudic scholarship. Scholars busy all day with pastoral, financial, and even educational administration cannot devote their lives to real scholarship. Hence the Council of Lithuania, in a law that goes a long way to explaining “the endeavor that is highest in the eyes of the society in question,” legislated that:

“Those who study Torah, for whom the Torah is their life, shall not veer from the tent of study, and their tax obligation shall be one half, even when they study within the community [...]” [§743, at Khomsk, 1679].

This was expanded in many individual communities, most famously Vilna, to include actual stipends for high level studies to free genuine scholars from financial worries for life. One law passed by the Council orders “distribution from commu-

nity funds for poor people who study Torah” [§742, at Khomsk 1679].

The proceedings of the Council record many instances of the Last Will and Testament of wealthy individuals, where the power of attorney and probate fell to the Council, demonstrating again the high degree of autonomy. As long as the Council paid the government the lump sum demanded for taxes, it could act as an autonomous legislature for the Jewish communities. Wills represented sudden and sometimes unexpected sums that needed to be disbursed in accordance with the deceased person’s wishes in the best way possible. It is remarkable how much wealth was not bequeathed to sons and daughters or even to extended families, but to the study of Torah.

One transcript that forms part of the *Pinkes* of the Council of Lithuania tells about the appearance before the court of one Pínkhes (Pinehas) the son of the deceased Yesháye (Isaiah), asking the court to bring order into the enactment of his late father’s will, including advice on how to invest a principal of six thousand *zehúvim* (“golden ones” = Zloty), so that the income accruing may serve in perpetuity to fulfill his father’s stated purposes. These include: scholarships for yeshiva students and elementary school pupils according to highly sophisticated rules of distribution based on geographic distribution as well as a calculus that reckons with the student’s other sources of scholarship support; funds for community preachers for Sabbaths; funds for teaching poor pupils the art of writing, and more [§401, Lublin, 1636].

A benefaction by Nekháme bas Benyómin (Nechama daughter of Benjamin) of Horódné (Grodna) enables her to build a *bismédresh* (studyhouse). It is to be “a beautifully constructed building with two floors and a basement, with a firm foundation, to last forever” [§831, at Khomsk, 1691].

“Nekháme’s studyhouse” was a beloved place of study and prayer in Grodna right up to the Holocaust.

Gershon ben Yisókher-Ber of Vilna had made a loan of 2,225 gulden to the Community of Vilna, which his sons, after his death, transferred to the community to be invested in perpetuity, so that no future heir or beneficiary (their own progeny!) could ever lay claim upon it. The annual income is to go for educational purposes: appointment of an elementary school teacher who must take at least twelve poor orphans as students; the teacher is required to take these children from learning the alphabet to the completion of the Mishna, as well as language and correct writing. The fund also covers the work of a higher scholar who will every week examine the boys to ensure that the instructor is succeeding at his work [§835, at Khomsk, 1691].



The *Pinkes* provides other peeks and glances into the life of Lithuanian Jewry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

“Each and every community shall cast its eye and its heart to investigate fully to ensure that there be no

card playing or throwing of dice, or any kind of gambling, so in the cities and so in the provinces; and whosoever transgresses the law of this amendment shall be punished immediately [...] with corporal punishment and monetary punishment, to repel and to pursue [the culprit] up to excommunication. And may all Israel be pure!" [§51, at Brisk, 1623]

Well, on the one hand, the law represents a total repugnance for all forms of gambling. On the other, where a law is written against something, it usually means that that something occurred in the society in question to elicit it. It may be fair to say that card playing, gambling, and dice throwing had to occur for such a harsh measure to be passed. These activities were associated with criminal leanings rather than just entertainment. In more recent Yiddish folklore, the antipathy of the Litvak establishment to card playing stands in contrast to the image of the Polish Jew for whom a game of cards is not particularly awful. Yitskhok (Isaac) Rivkind (1895—1968) published a major work in 1946 on the cultural history of rabbinic efforts to ban gambling over the centuries, concentrating on the earlier centuries of western Ashkenaz. He demonstrated that the issue was one with deep roots in Ashkenazic history.

Philologists have much to learn from the language of the *Pinkes*. Its charming chancery Ashkenazic Hebrew is laced with Aramaic expressions from the Talmud for legal concepts, and items from everyday realia in Lithuanian Yiddish. In the terminology of money, there is the *zhuv-Póyln* (Polish Zloty) and *shok-Líte* (Lithuanian shok = 60 grosh). There are novel Yiddish-Hebraic creations

such as for the concept of unforeseen expenses which are called *nóldes* (*noyldoys*, literally “new-born ones”). The word *shráyber* which means “writer” in modern Yiddish, is used in the sense of “bureaucrat” or someone who writes documents for the customs authorities. A creative writer of rabbinic treatises is referred to by the Hebrew-derived term *mekháber* (literally “compiler”).

For general historians there is material about the nature of the border between Lithuania and Poland in the years before and after the Union of Lublin of 1569. There are complex rulings which are meant to satisfy the requirements of the authorities on both sides without inhibiting contacts or travel.

Although it is important not to anachronize by seeing only good in the Councils in terms of modern standards, it is also important to place the period of the Councils in the historical context of all that came before and after. The “basic deal” of honest taxation and loyalty to the state in return for autonomy and protection is one that lies at the heart of what came to be called *autonomy* and *the rights of minorities* centuries later.

The grand experiment, in both Poland and Lithuania, came to an end in the 1760s. The last entry is the *takóne* no. 1030, which ends with the words:

“All of the above [referring to the final assembly] went out from the leaders, the rabbis, the great scholars and the famous, heads of the rabbinical courts and of the yeshivas of the principal cities of our land, may God watch over and preserve her, who sit on the chair of judgment at this sacred Váad of a great land. Monday, 11 Tamuz [5]521

[=113 July 1761] here in the sacred community of Slutsk,
may God watch over and save her. The word of

Avrohom of the House of Katzenelenboygim of
Brisk d'Lite

Moyshe-Yeshue ha-Leyvi Horovits of Horódne

Yisroel-Isserl of Pinsk

Shmuel of Vilna

Yisokher, called Ber, of Slutsk

And with these words, the great Record
Book of the Council of Lithuania came to its close,
though the council functioned for a brief time
thereafter, and many of its institutions continued
to do their work on a regional basis, albeit with-
out a central Lithuania-wide authority.

The ostensible reason for the demise of the
council was the switchover in 1762 of both

Lithuania and Poland, from a lump-sum tax on the
entire Jewish community to a system of individual
taxation of all citizens. The government no longer
needed the councils, and communal power could
now only be local at best. Of course, the change
struck at the heart of collective Jewish autonomy.

Historians see here one of the portents of
the decline of an empire. The Lithuanian-Polish
commonwealth was about to be swallowed up by
the "Partitions of Poland" of 1772, 1793 and
1795. It was not only a Jewish "golden age" that
was coming to an end. While Polish Jewry was
destined to be divided up between the Russian and
Austro-Hungarian Empires, the Litvaks were all
to become part of the Pale of Settlement in the
Russian Empire. And that is another chapter in the
history of Lithuanian Jewry.

Chapter 6

The Gaon of Vilna

In the later 1700s, the continuing rise in the stature of Lita, and particularly of Vilna, in the eyes of traditional Jewish scholars internationally, reached a pinnacle. The growing concentration of scholars and new works was crowned by one scholar of extraordinary talent and strength of personality (though in no way a charismatic, warm leader of his people). He was of course Eylióhu ben Shloyme-Zalmen (Elijah the son of Solomon Zalman), best known as: the Gaon of Vilna or the Vilna Gaon (a popular English construction taken from the Yiddish — *der Vilner góen*). He was born around 1720 and died in 1797.

For generations, his ancestors had been rooted in Vilna but not there alone. Some had hailed from, or lived in other European towns and cities, in Lithuania and outside it. The travels and relocations were the result of one of three factors. The two happy ones include travel for marriage and for study with great sages at great yeshivas (or both). The unhappy cause was flight from war, persecution and civil disorder. The accompanying outline genealogy and map (p. 87) are intended to summarize the major known episodes in the

Gaon's genealogy. Most startling is the story of his ancestor, the sharp Talmudic scholar Moyshe Rivkes of Vilna, who lived from around 1590 to 1671. Rivkes fled Vilna in 1655, during the Russian-Polish war, and made his way to Amsterdam where his Talmudic learning dazzled the well-to-do Jewish community there. He was commissioned to proofread Joseph Karo's *Shúlkhon órukh* for a new edition (see p. 68). He also added comments which taken together amount to a new commentary. It turned out to be a precursor of the work of his descendant to be, the Gaon. He analyzed texts for their true meaning and proposed emendations where he found the text faulty. After completing his contract in Amsterdam, he returned to his beloved Vilna a wealthy man, and left a trust fund for such of his descendants who would excel at Torah studies, to enable them to devote their lives to scholarship and not worry about making a living. It was that stipend that enabled Eylióhu to spend his life immersed in learning.

The Gaon was acknowledged by masters of Talmudic learning to be the sharpest rabbinic mind for a thousand years (or more). Moreover, a

few of his own traits of character came to symbolize, at least in folklore, the anecdotal traits of the Litvak. But his “personal extremism” was all in the cause of devoting himself to study and shunning the time-wasters and temptations that account for so much of our lives. The absolute love of learning, even if it could be emulated only a little bit by everyday people, helped make the words *Vilne* and *Lite* among the most intimate and beautiful in the Yiddish language.

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In faraway towns deep in Poland, parents would tell their children, in Polish Yiddish: *Vilno, 'esti zaan a guen!* (“If you only want it badly enough, you will become a Gaon,” a play on the near homonymy of “If you only want to” and the word for “Vilna” in this dialect of Yiddish). The word *gaon* had in the late first millennium meant “the official head of Babylonian Jewry” but in Ashkenaz, the *góen* came to mean, plain and simple, the leading Talmudic scholar of a generation. Used on its own with just the definite article, the meaning of *der góen* is quite unmistakable in Yiddish of recent centuries. It can mean only Eyliohu of Vilna.

But the purpose of this chapter is not to repeat the usual biography. There are many encyclopedia articles and books (for a first listing, see the bibliography at the end of this volume). Following a summary of his life and work, extended quotations will be brought, in translation, from the one “intimate” document he is ever known to have written. It is an extensive letter to his family, written at a most human of moments, when a person is unsure of ever seeing loved ones again. This will be

followed by an unabridged translation of the piece written by his two sons after their father’s death. It turns out that these two genuine documents from the period are in many respects far from the hagiographic treatments that have been piled on in later times. Together they (and some other extant pieces) paint, with sharp strokes, a human picture of a very real person, who happens *not* to be the classical hero or even rabbinic leader in any usual sense of term.

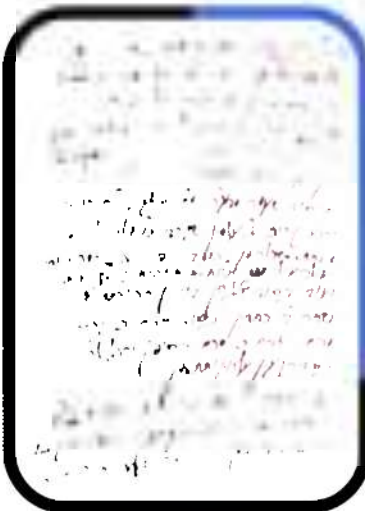
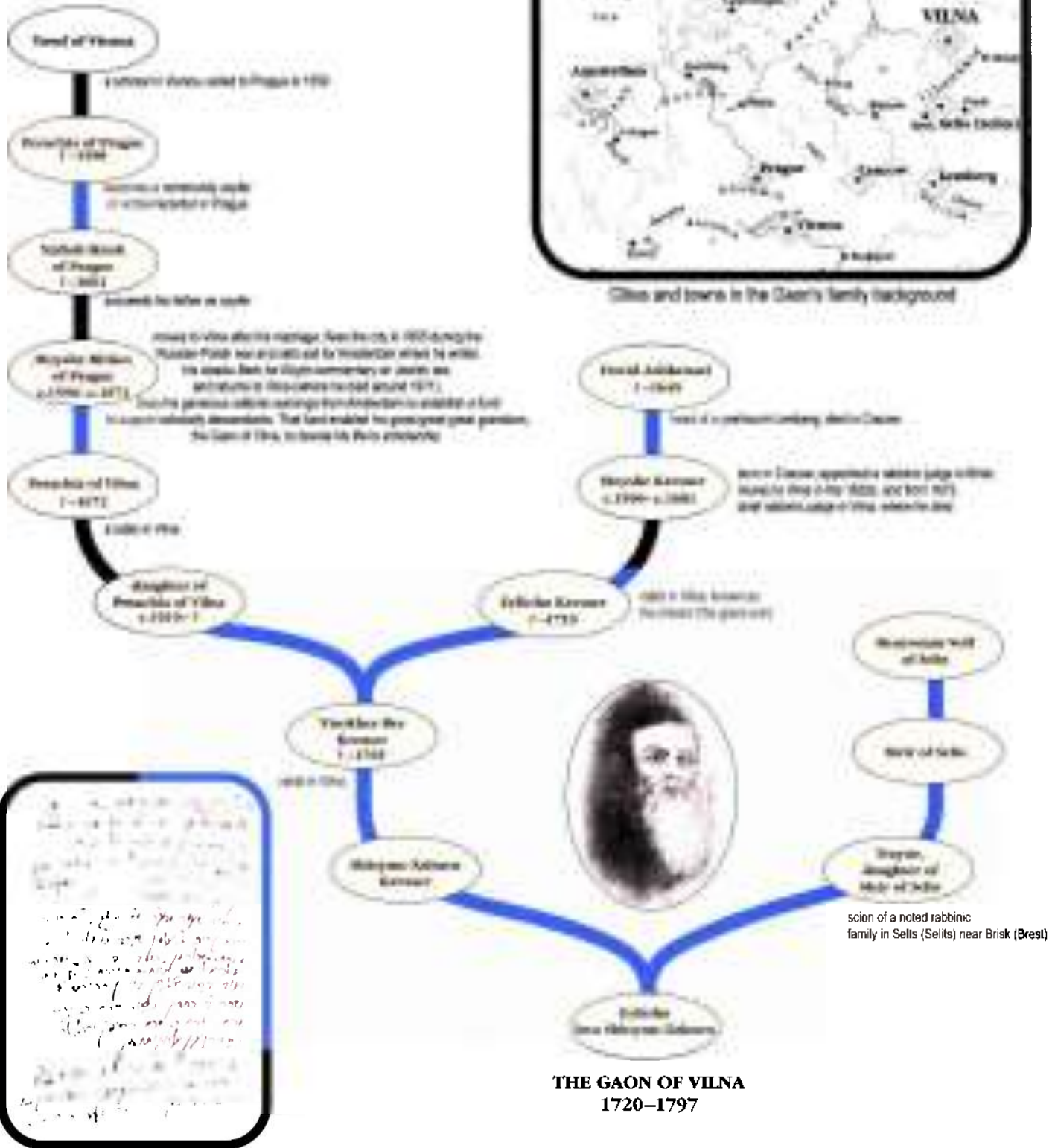
It may come as a surprise that some of the most elementary details of the biography of the best known Litvak of all time are in dispute, all the more so in a society so given to writing, reading, studying in all its three languages! But this is just another intriguing cultural difference between traditional East European Jewry and modern western (and modern Jewish) culture. The genre “biography” was not part of traditional Ashkenazic culture. Latter day construction of the life of a beloved personality was in a sense meant to be based on a charmingly woven tapestry of facts, legends and praise, with lessons and morals for us simple folk all along the way. Reconstruction is rendered even more difficult by the failure of most great rabbinic scholars to record the basic details of their lives. For one thing, birthday celebrations (of oneself, one’s spouse or children) did not figure in this culture; it was typical in a family to remember a birthday in reference to the cycle of Jewish holidays, for example “So and so was born between *Péysakh* (Passover) and *Shvúes* (Pentecost)” and the like. Moreover, a scholar would write as little as possible (often zero) about his own life. “My trials and

THE VILNA GAON'S ANCESTRY

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Cities and towns in the Gaon's family background



The Gaon's handwriting

THE GAON OF VILNA
1720-1797

tribulations” yarns would have been a shocking violation of the modesty and humility that are required of every true scholar in the eyes of this culture. It was also considered uniquely irrelevant: the scholar was debating in his lifework with the *commentaries* of Talmudic scholars of hundreds of years before and after, not primarily with individuals of his time. That scholars were often given acronymic names taken from the titles of their books is one component of this scene. A modern yeshiva student groping “with a difficult Taz” is struggling with a text called Taz, not with the individual who wrote it and was given this epithet based on his work (see p. 66). It is as if the name of the book that became the name of the man afterwards became the name not of the book but of the text, in this case as many, of a certain column called *Taz* in the printed editions of the various works where it is included.

Within this culture then, it is not too difficult to understand why there is no reliable biography of the Gaon.

He was born on Passover 1720. Or, according to others, in 1722. He was born in his mother’s town Selts (Selits) near Brisk (now Brest, Belarus). Then again, he may have been born in Vilna itself. Right up to the war, the “regulars” in the Vilna *Shúl-heyf* would show visitors the exact dwelling in a nearby yard where he was said to have come into this world.

As a very young boy he showed two kinds of brilliance. First, phenomenal memory for many pages of Talmud and the ability to conjure up an exact text for a specific argument and to demon-

strate its relevance. And second, profound understanding of the deepest logical levels of texts. His family agreed with the visiting rabbi of Keydán (now Kėdainiai, Lithuania) that this boy should spend some years studying with a brilliantly original scholar there, Moyshe Margolis (Margalioth). Margolis was then one of the top scholars in Lita and became a specialist in the long neglected Jerusalem Talmud (see p. 32). His commentary often includes close textual comparisons between the two Talmuds, as well as daring proposed emendations of printed versions that had become faulty. Margolis also believed in the need to study natural sciences. Around the age of seventy he went to study botany at the University of Frankfurt on the Oder (to better come to grips with the Jerusalem Talmud’s tractate on the agriculture of ancient Israel). He had a profound influence on the life’s work of the boy who was sent to study with him. Eyliohu was also betrothed in Keydán to one Kháne (Chana), daughter of a well to do man (legend says he suffered huge losses between his daughter’s engagement and marriage, as God was testing the character of Eyliohu, who would not break his word). He was married to her when he was about eighteen.

At some point after marriage and return to Vilna, he followed an old tradition of ascetic scholars: to go into exile. He wandered incognito through Poland, Ukraine and Germany, visiting many Jewish communities.

The Gaon had a number of children, but the experts have come to different conclusions on that too, ranging from one daughter and two sons

to five daughters and three sons. Chaim Freedman, master genealogist of Gaonia (as the field is sometimes called nowadays) accepts the evidence for eight: a daughter (name unknown!), born around 1741; daughter Khiyéne, born around 1748; Peshe-Básye (around 1750); a daughter (name unknown!), born around 1752; sons Shloyme-Zalmen (born 1758), Yehude-Leyb (1764), Avrohom (around 1765), and daughter Toybe (around 1768). After the death of his first wife, Kháne of Keydán, in 1782, he married a widow, Gitl of Krozh (now Kražiai, Lithuania).

As a young man, his fame spread swiftly. Rabbis twice his age appealed to him for answers to conundrums that stumped them. In one famous case, a dispute raging in Germany was sent to him for resolution. The leading Talmudist and Kabbalist, Jonathan Eybeshutz (\pm 1690—1764), rabbi of the “three communities” (Altona, Hamburg, Wansbek) was accused of secret adherence to the messianic sect of Sabbateans. Eybeshutz wrote to Eyliohtu in Vilna in 1756 to ask him to analyze the documents which his arch enemy, Jacob Emden (1697—1776) had offered as evidence, and to proclaim him innocent. The Gaon, in his polite reply, refused to get involved, asking “Who am I?”

That same aloofness saved Eyliohtu from involvement in a long running dispute in Vilna itself about who would be chief rabbi (the result of the dispute being that the community decided that never again would Vilna have a chief rabbi, but that is another story). Keeping out of conflict and even routine communal affairs enabled the Gaon

to devote so much of his life to research and scholarship. His distance from his own family, as we shall see from his sons’ memoir, takes matters to an extreme that nobody ever recommended as a role model for anyone. Nevertheless, a certain personal distance in general came to be one of the folkloristic attributes of the Litvak. Others include stubbornness, an intolerance for wanton innovation, an obsession to get to the bottom of every mystery confronted, a dislike of crowds and commotions and overt emotional outpourings, and an all consuming passion for simplicity of lifestyle, honesty in daily life and above all: learning, learning and more learning, a nonstop lifelong endeavor to study. All of these personified the Gaon, and his people who tried as much as they could to follow him, the Litvaks — Lithuanian Jewry.

Not only did Eyliohtu not accept any of the many rabbinic posts offered him. He did not even teach in a local yeshiva, much less set up his own. After the age of forty, he assembled a small circle of top scholars “and learned with them” as the Yiddish construction would have it (and which has made its way now into the English of today’s orthodox Jewry). Some of these pupils took the notes from which a number of his commentaries were later published. A well-to-do relation, Yesháye Peseles, purchased land next door to Eyliohtu’s home, and built a studyhouse on the lot in 1768. It became known as *dem Goens kloyz* (“the Gaon’s little studyhouse”). After his death, and right up until the war, Torah was studied there twenty-four hours a day in different shifts by scholars who would drop everything to be counted among *dem Goens*

prúshim (“The Gaon’s scholars who separated themselves from everything to study constantly”; see p. 117). For many Jews, it was considered, second only to Jerusalem, to be the most sacred Jewish spot on God’s earth.

During all those years on *Yidishe gas* (“Jewish Street,” now *Żydų gatvė* in Vilnius), Eyliohu created some seventy works, none of which was published in his lifetime. The word “created” is used here because “wrote” (or “compiled”) does not always fit the bill. In some cases a rabbinic work consists of comments written in the margins of a book which are then published in a separate publication or included in some future edition of the primary work. A number of the Gaon’s published works consist of the notes made by the small circle of pupils from his sessions over the years in his *kloyz*. He thus authored them without necessarily writing them.

In the case of his commentary on the Talmud, the style is laconic in the extreme. On many a page the Gaon’s few words “change everything” in the study of the page (see facsimile on p. 112).

Some fifty of his works have been published so far, and a new project to publish all extant works in a hundred or so volumes is well underway (see p. 108).

The Gaon did however complete the manuscripts of many books during his lifetime. These include commentaries to nearly all the Hebrew Bible, and on many works of the Mishnaic period (Mishna, Braitā, Tosefta, Midrash). He completed a number of weighty tomes on Kabbalah. It continues to mystify many that this proponent of rational-

ism in Talmudic studies should also be so creative in the decidedly non-logical realm of Jewish mysticism. But this same genius also completed books at the opposite end of the continuum, on Hebrew grammar, trigonometry, astronomy, calendrics, and one work of notes on a variety of subjects. According to his follower Boruch of Shklov (see p. 216), the Gaon told him in 1778 that for every failing in the general sciences, a scholar will have a hundred-fold failing in Torah studies.

The Gaon of Vilna’s scholarship was based on a synthesis of traditional absolute belief in the sanctity of the Torah (including the notion that it contains many mysteries to occupy learned minds for eternity), and a modern analytic mind that understood that all subsequent texts (including the many editions of the Talmud and the vast rabbinic literature) were subject to being copied or published with errors. He invented for Judaic texts what is today called textual reconstruction. Where many previous rabbis (especially the Polish school of pilpulists) had constructed elaborate castles in the air to account for incomprehensible passages and contradictions, the Gaon used philological principles to get to the simple meaning of the original text. With his phenomenal memory, he was able to draw upon parallel or similar texts elsewhere in rabbinic literature, and was often able to reconstruct a correct original that solves the problem. To sum it up anachronistically: even if the Torah is wholly untouchable from the textual point of view, there is still one whole lot left for the human intellect to take on; and in Torah interpretation per se, there is a way of logic within

the belief system that contrasts with the methodology of hocus pocus.



Eylioahu the Gaon of Vilna is known to have written only one down-to-earth document for “everyday people” and even that was not for the public of everyday people. It was the letter he wrote (possibly from Königsberg) to his wife and his mother (and more generally his family) while on a long, lonely journey to the Land of Israel. He never made it, and returned to Vilna for reasons unknown (in spite of the various apocryphal causes propounded to this day). The letter itself was published long after his death (Minsk 1836 and other editions).

Written in simple Hebrew (and laced with quotations from the Bible and other sacred texts), it begins with the words:

“I would like to ask of you not to be sad at all, as you promised me truly, and also not to worry, as my mother (may she live) promised me. In any case, what is there to worry about? After all, people go on trips and leave their wives for some years for money, and wander about without anything, and I, thank God, am traveling to the Holy Land, which everyone yearns to see [...] and I travel in tranquility, thank God. And, as you know, I have left my children, for whom my heart yearns, and all my precious books. I really have left everything behind.”

Perhaps because he intended it only as a “living will” for his immediate family, there are kinds of personal comments that lend him a humanity not evident from his massive scholarly

output. He begs his mother and wife to get along.

“I also want to ask my wife to honor my mother, as it is written in the Torah, and especially regarding a widow. Causing her pain even with some small thing is a grave sin. And also of my mother, I ask that there be peace among you, and that each of you will make the other happy with good words.”

There are a number of instructions for everyday life. Among them: his demand that his family always give one fifth of their income to poor people (rather than the usual tenth); that his children be educated strictly, even with corporal punishment when necessary; that a private teacher be taken to teach the children and that he be paid well; but that they be taught Torah in a relaxed atmosphere, with rewards for success. For many it may come as a surprise that Eylioahu, whose own scholarly works are all in difficult Hebrew or Aramaic, stressed to his own family the need for books on ethics and morality (*Muser literature*) in Yiddish, the vernacular. He asks the family to read the Yiddish Muser books in his library

“all the time, and even more so on the holiest of holies, the Sabbath; they should not spend time with books other than these Muser books.”

But elsewhere in the letter he commends another Yiddish book even over these:

“And among my books there is a copy of Proverbs with Yiddish translation. For God’s sake, read it every day. It is better even than all the Muser books! And also the book of Ecclesiastes [...]”

One thread that runs through much of the text is the prohibition against talking ill of others (gossip and slander). For the Gaon, this greatest

of evils cannot be overcome unless one adopts a lifestyle of speaking as little as possible altogether!

“The main thing, you must not speak about a person to praise them, and all the more so must you not speak to insult someone.”

He condemns small talk, trivia, and nonsense, stressing that what comes out of one’s mouth reverberates for eternity and cannot be taken back. He quotes an ancient text to the effect that “treating people with respect is more important than Torah,” quite a statement coming from a man who fought the battles of Torah learning as the main cause of his life.

He warns his family of the evils of jealousy. Taking into account both the temptation to be jealous of others who are better off and the risk of speaking badly of others, he commands a life of considerable isolation from other people.

“And everything you need to buy, do it by messenger, even if it is two or three times more expensive.”

Even more of a shock is his warning against going out the front door, and — the dangers of synagogue attendance!

“And the most important protection is solitude, not to go outside, God forbid, from the door of your house. And even in the prayerhouse, stay very briefly and leave. And it is better to pray at home, because in the prayerhouse it is impossible to be spared from jealousy and from listening to small talk and gossip.”

All in all, the Gaon’s recipe for a good life is one that is, as far as possible, away from people:

“I warn you therefore, to get used to spending as much of your time as possible alone, because the sin of the tongue is worse than all of them.”

A careful reading of the Gaon’s letter to his

family reveals that the twin dangers — first, of falling into a “sin of speech” (gossip, small talk and so forth) and second, into envy of others — are not all that lie behind his exhortations to stay away from people. The letter contains a fairly explicit debunking of what the American Declaration of Independence, following British philosopher John Locke, calls “the pursuit of happiness,” with a heavy dose of quotations from one of the saddest books in the Bible.

“ ‘And happiness: what does it accomplish?’ [Ecclesiastes 2: 2.] For tomorrow you will cry just as today you laughed! Don’t lust after imaginary glory. It is worthless! Time is a traitor! It is like a set of scales, lifting the light and lowering the weighty. The way of humanity can be compared to drinking salt water. You think you are quenching your thirst but you are making it worse. People do not die with even half their passions having been fulfilled. ‘What profit has man for all his labor?’ [Ecclesiastes 1: 3]. Think of the earlier people, all those who came before us, that all ‘their love as well as their hate and their envy, it is all long ago perished’ [Ecclesiastes 9:6], and they are being judged severely for it! So what does a person need pleasure for? His end is to become dust, maggots, and worms.”

The Gaon’s thoughts on parents and children are also stark.

“And there is no advantage to having sons and daughters except in their Torah and in their good deeds.” He warns against leaving one’s wealth to one’s children:

“Don’t tell yourself ‘I will leave it for my children’ because who will tell you about it in the grave? ‘People are like the grasses of the field, some blossom and

some wither away' [Babylonian Talmud, Eyrubin 54a]. Everybody is born with his luck and under the watchfulness of God, blessed be He."

There seems to be just one topic on which Eyllohu turns warm, fatherly and loving: generosity to children to encourage them to excel at Torah.

"I have left them books. And for God's sake, show them the right path with goodness and pleasantness. And look after their health and food all the time, so that they shouldn't lack anything, and see that they should first study the *Khúmesh* [Pentateuch], that they should know it almost by heart. And don't do it with pressure, but gently, for what one has studied can be absorbed only with contemplation and pleasantness, so be generous with giving them pennies and the like. And put your mind to this, because all the rest is worthless."

So there we have it: a guide for a life that is so intense, it could almost have been written as a satire by an anti-Litvak (see the next chapter). But it must be remembered that extremes such as not leaving one's home never became traditions of even the smallest minority of Litvaks.

Nevertheless, like all stereotypes, there is some folkloristic and anthropological truth. Throughout Yiddish folklore and literature, the Litvak is portrayed as less given to festivity and hurrahization of life. He or she is quieter and less talkative ("less friendly and warm" in some southern anti-Litvak renditions) than the rest of Eastern European Jewry, and he or she is in love with — learning. In this sense, the Gaon's "exaggerated" traits have more than something to say about the character of traditional Lithuanian Jewry.



Most of the biographies of the Gaon of Vilna are, quite naturally, based upon earlier biographies, and those earlier biographies drew almost entirely from one source: the piece about the Gaon written by his sons Yehude-Leyb and Avrom, which fills about one side of one huge folio page of the introductory material to standard editions of the *Óyrakh Kháyim* (*Orah Hayyim*), one of the four sections of the *Shúlkhon órukh* (*Shulhan Aruch*) code of law.

Taken as the words of sons about their father, and given the amount of information and opinion that are concentrated in the text, it seems best to simply present, perhaps for the first time, the entire text in English translation.

This translation attempts to preserve the style and spirit of the original, which itself has much to say about Lithuanian Jewish culture. It is written in a classic East European rabbinic Hebrew that fuses the everyday vocabulary of the Talmudic scholar with numerous quotations from sacred texts, mostly the Bible, but also the Mishna, Talmud and the prayerbook. These quotations are part of a stylistic mosaic where they take on a new life in the context of the piece where they appear. Most frequently they simply provide the writer with "vocabulary by association" giving the text a quasi-Biblical flavor; much of the time, it is only the phraseology rather than the Biblical passage that is being invoked. Then there are entire Biblical passages, most often at the end of a paragraph or section as a sort of rhetorical flourish that would delight an audience if performed by a traditional *mágid* or preacher who

triumphantly concludes an original monologue with a Biblical passage that sums it up or provides the moral of the story.

Many (certainly not all) of the references to the texts cited are provided in square brackets (even where the quote is not exact but its phrasing derives from a certain classical passage). The traditional title used for any respected person in traditional texts is the letter *reys*h (r) with an abbreviation sign which is rendered *Reb* by Ashkenazim. The division into paragraphs and sentences does not follow the original.

Introduction to the commentary of the Gaon of Vilna on the *Shulkhon óruk*

by the outstanding rabbi, of extraordinary recall and breadth of knowledge, wise and whole, honored by the House of Israel, our teacher the rabbi, Reb Avrohom may his light go forward; and his brother, the phenomenal in Torah and Godfearingness, wise and understanding, his honor our teacher the rabbi, Reb Yehude-Leyb, sons of the true Gaon, pious one of God, our teacher Rabbi Elyohu (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come) of Vilna, his soul now in paradise.

With what shall I bow myself and with what shall I come before you? [Micah 6: 6]. For all that He has given us as is the way of His mercy upon the flock of His hand and the people of His pasture [Psalms 95: 7], and for

them His desire, from the day of their origin unto this very day, He did not budge from his affection, pursuing love, as is the way of the good hand of our God.

One generation passes away and another comes around [Ecclesiastes 1:4]. But the people of Israel stand on the hill of *l'lorah*, through changes of guard as in battalions of warriors. And so the sun rises and the sun sets [Ecclesiastes 1: 5]. Before the sun had set upon this righteous person to die with love of God, the sun of another righteous person shone upon a great land [Genesis Rabbo, Noah, 2].

My father saw, O he saw how great the neglect had been [Isaiah 6: 12] for a very long time, to the point where a father could not make known to his sons the truth [Isaiah 58: 19] of the Torah because of all the troubles and all the grief. For the days of the Exile from the time of the destruction of our Temple have been very long for us. And our strength has diminished. And our hearts have felt deserted. Our hands have become weak and our eyes dim. And our ears made hard of hearing. And our tongue silenced. And most of our words were taken, and the sources of our wisdom blocked. And speculations became flawed, conflict grew, and interpretations multiplied. And there has not remained a legal judgment handed down that does not show a whole array of misunderstandings.

But the creator of light [Isaiah 45:7] in His goodness constantly renews the act of Genesis [from the prayerbook, *Yoytser*]. He has set the lights of the righteous to coincide with the time of the darkness of the Exile [prayerbook, *Yoytser* for Sabbath]. He prepared and brought into being [prayerbook, *Yoytser*] the splendor of authors who give light like the light of the Heavens [Daniel 12: 5]. Not all of us have been worthy of their light, and we

fumbled like the blind at midday [cf. Isaiah 59: 10]. Behold their valiant ones [cry out in public, Isaiah 33]: 'The hearts of the Early Masters were as the door to the great chamber of the Temple in Jerusalem [Talmud Eyrubin 53a], and we are orphans of orphans [Talmud Kesubots 106a] whose voice goes unheard.'

The ancients all stood at the heights of the world [prayerbook], mouths that spoke great things [Daniel 7: 20], and in the war of the Torah [Talmud Sanhedrin 111b], they did battle together proclaiming the voice of the King of the World [prayerbook, *Joytser*]. We however have no mouth and no tongue. And the light of their Torah study does not illuminate our eyes in the darkness. For our sins have covered our faces, and hide from us the light of our Torah. For all our days people turned to the Torah not for its own sake [Mishna, Sayings of the Fathers, 6: 1], and they have wasted our years in the futility of sin [Psalms 90: 9].

Nevertheless, God left us just one [Isaiah 1:9] thing in His world: the four cubits of studying the Torah [Talmud Brokhtots 8a]; that is the portion of the Holy One Blessed be He, that would be His glory and His splendor [Daniel 4: 33].

His light appeared in the year 482 of the Sixth Millennium [= 1722]. It was the first day of Passover. We heard a voice of joy and deliverance in the tents of that righteous man [Psalms 118: 15] in the world, the great and famous rabbinic master, my grandfather our teacher Shloyme-Zalmen of the sacred community of Selts [now Selits, Belarus], a city full of wise people and scribes, near the sacred city Brisk d'Lite [Brisk of Lithuania = Brest Litovsk, now Brest, Belarus].

The skies sent out a sound [Psalms 77: 17]: Behold a son is given to him [cf. I Kings 13: 2]. He shall

raise the work of the Torah. He shall reveal deep mysteries [Job 12: 22]. He shall satisfy the yearning of the soul [Psalms 107: 9], even in distant islands. His sanctity and his separation [from the world at large] went forth, increased, and was enhanced from the day of his birth. He studied with a teacher only until the age of six. And from then — God's voice crieth unto the city [Micah 6: 9], for the ears of select people of understanding.

They looked upon the boy with intense eyes. A lantern of Light! [Babylonian Talmud, Ksubots 17a; Sanhedrin 14a]. His mouth comes out with gems in the company of old sages [Psalms 107: 32]. His lips are as roses [Song of Songs 5: 13]. A voice that distinguishes the finest nuances.

When he was six and a half years old, he gave a learned analysis in the Great Synagogue of Vilna on a fine nuance of Torah that his father had taught him. And at the third meal of that Sabbath his father took him before the great rabbinic scholar, Rabbi Heshil (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come), head of the rabbinic court of the sacred community of Vilna, and the rabbi Reb Heshil said to the great scholars seated in front of him: Is there anyone as wise and full of understanding [Genesis 41: 39] as this little boy? They replied with the words: 'This is not a real miracle, just a sign of his good memory of things. So his father taught him and showed it to him and repeated it to him, once, twice and three times, until he learned it through and through.'

Whereupon the rabbi Reb Heshil answered: 'Yes, but still, I feel somehow certain in my heart about this boy and his achievement, that he would be able to say similar things from his own mind. I will give him one hour to prepare something, and you will see something incredible!'

And he was left alone to prepare for about an hour. And he came up with many additional sharp challenges, and then he refuted them, each in a different style! As they listened, they marveled [Psalms 48: 5]. Everybody wanted to kiss him and hug him. After they heard it all, they said that there is nobody who is as wise and full of understanding as he [Genesis 41: 39].

By the time he was nine years old, he had mastered Bible, Mishna and Gemora. And he was very skillful [Deuteronomy 33: 7] with the views of all that is said there. All the expositions of the Agodah [Aggadah] also blossomed up in him after that.

A vision from within aroused him, saying: 'Who doesn't have curiosity for the Secrets, hidden from everybody, which are to be found in the book *The Tree of Life*? [compiled teachings of the kabbalist Isaac Luria of Safad (1534—1572)]. Even though they are sealed from the eyes of all living, God will show you! Likewise in the things that are exceedingly difficult in the *Shas* [Talmud], the Codifiers and the Responsa, and the commentators, both the earlier and later ones. That knowledge from your understanding will make you happy. You worked to find something and did not find it? Do not believe your heart!' [Talmud Megillo 6: 2].

Immediately, he succeeded to study the books of the revealed matters and the esoteric matters, and he studied all the works of the *Tree of Life* in half a year. This was only through the grace of God. Who could then collect a spirit [Proverbs 30: 4] of wisdom and perception to recount all his praises?

And when he turned thirteen years and one day [the male age of majority], he accepted the responsibilities of his special status as a righteous one, and his separation from the world at large, as the lofty horns of the wild-ox [Numbers 23: 22; 24: 8].

From that day onward until the day of his death he did not look outside his own four cubits. And he endeavored to *not* enjoy the pleasures of this world. He ate little: lean bread, to a measure of two olives, dunked into water. And he ate them evening and morning. But he did not allow his palate to taste them, but swallowed them whole. His being was imbued with love of God. He made the Torah and the work of God into a canopy for himself. He made his nights to be as his days, to reveal the Word of God through the true exposition of the Torah, after it had been sold into the bondage of error by its students, and needed to be put right.

Who can teach new aspects and novel sides of the old laws, and of the received exegesis as he does? What kind of fool would avoid [Proverbs 9: 7] trying to bring wisdom to his heart [Isaiah 44: 18], or to hasten most rapidly [Exodus 22: 15] to acquire the path to understanding [Isaiah 40: 14]?

He both understood the nature of a quandary and specified its precise source [Job 28: 23]. His hands were up to the task [Deuteronomy 33: 7] of hoisting the banner [Leviticus 10: 15] in the war of Torah [Talmud Sanhedrin 111b] in order to reach absolute truth in understanding it. He widened its borders through various distinguished pupils. He was able to delve into the depths of legal discussions. But none of them reached halfway to his ankles, and it is doubtful whether any reached even a third or fourth of the way.

His desire was for the Torah of God and that is what his soul cleaved to all his days and his minutes, and through the seasons of his life. He listened to the language of truth and resided in its depths, and 'the first part thereof he chose for himself' [Deuteronomy 33: 21].

For six years he pondered and researched [Ecclesiastes 12: 9] the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the *Yoseftas*, the *Mechilta*, *Sifra* and *Sifrei*, and he illuminated the gloom of darkness that clouded the multiple textual variants as well as [correcting] the methodology that had been used with its excessive *pilpul*, which left one neither coming nor going [Joshua 6: 1]. And he opened things up, wide and clear, and everyone said: 'Blessed is the people for whom things are like this' [Psalms 144: 15; prayers].

Who is like him who has planted the true Torah among us [prayerbook, Sabbath blessing on the Torah]? Like him a teacher of truth, seeking real truth, wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One [Proverbs 30: 3]? And people had the benefit of his advice and sound counsel [Proverbs 8: 14]. 'His fruits were multiplied unto him' [Hosea 10: 1].

A further six years he occupied himself with the words of the Codifiers: the Early Masters, and the Late Masters. They are those great ones from time immemorial, men of renown [Genesis 6: 4], geniuses, the first and the last. But he did not rely upon the greatness of their greatness, nor upon the wisdom of their wisdom, nor the sanctity of their sanctity, just to save them from being seen to stumble and err, or to seek justification for their views. Instead, with all his strength he worked, and was adamant to come to grips with and reach understanding of the sacred words of the sages of the *Gemora* itself, whose every word burns like glistening coal. With one letter of the words of the great rabbis of old he refuted many of the views of the later authors. Windows of light from Heaven were opened for him, for God made for a wonder [Psalms 31: 22] unto Himself this righteous person.

Verily, how can we be so arrogant as to assess his knowledge and his wisdom, to measure his stature according to our measurements? God who guided him as a shepherd [Genesis 48: 15], sent before him His light and His truth, to show him the way in which to go — the truth was a candle before his feet — to reach ultimate comprehension and knowledge, to achieve understanding in God's Torah of great things and mighty things whose place no man knew. But the toil of a man is repaid unto him [Job 34: 11].

And He planted for him the ray of salvation [prayerbook]: to refute indefensible opinions, which he undermined; and, through which awesome revelations in Torah were revealed to him.

If you will sharpen your eyes, brother, and pass your attention to his commentary on the *Shálkhon óruk* from chapter to chapter and from section to section in your love and passion for the truth, your eyes will see clearly [Psalms 17: 2] that our master the Beys Yoysef of Blessed Memory [Joseph Karo, 1488—1575, author of the *Shálkhon óruk*] was the compiler of all the accrued opinions and he deliberated on them according to his vast understanding. And he gathered them as the sheaves to the threshing floor [Micah 4: 12] in his concise compilation.

And our ancestor the rabbi, the genius, our teacher Reb Moyshe [Rivkes, died ± 1672] who wrote the *B'eyr ha-Góylo* ["Well of the Diaspora"] revealed to us the sources of all the laws and all the opinions in the great compilation of our master the Beys Yoysef (as explained in the introduction to the *B'eyr ha-Góylo*). And father, the *Góon* (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come), in this work of his, pointed to the source of each and every word in an explicit *Gemora*, in

the Babylonian or Jerusalem Talmud or the words of Rashi and Toysfes [Tosafoth, mostly from the 12th to the 14th centuries], something that neither our master the Beys Yoysef, nor any of our predecessors were able to achieve, other than to derive them through *pilpul*, deep and sweet, and may the spirit of their words live on [after Genesis 45: 28]. And the new aspects were revealed, as if all the opinions were given from one shepherd [Ecclesiastes 12: 11] to one recipient. We cannot comprehend how he was able to achieve this [Exodus 32: 1].

How he benefited from the passion for truth, which placed before him a correct and straightforward track. With it he overcame his natural human urges and submitted his strengths to the ancient bond of the covenant [Ezekiel 20: 37]. He dedicated his soul and his heart to God from his youth. 'My beloved is mine and I am his' [Song of Songs 2: 16].

The deceitful images emanating from the pleasures of *this* world did not manage to lead him astray from the commands of God, not even from a single one. And he was quick to keep them according to all that is written. And there would not be found in him a sin that he sinned [Hosea 12: 9] relying on the opinions of some authority who interprets in favor of leniency. And he gave his life to fulfill all the intricacies of the precepts of our rabbis of old, including those not included in the *Shúlkhon órukh*. For he said: 'God created me from the womb to serve Him' [Isaiah 49: 5].

Now I will tell you about one of his habits. Once, when he was on the road, he stayed over in the home of an honest man. In the evening, the owner gave him food, and implored him to eat, and put it in his mouth, but he threw it up, because his stomach was unsettled. The owner returned and found the plate was full just as before. And he

implored him again. And he began to eat and threw it up again. And this happened three or four times. And one of the greatest of his renowned pupils who was with him asked him why he pains himself so, since he is not able to eat at that time. And he replied: 'Did not our rabbis of old say: Whatever the host tells you, do? [Talmud Psokhim 86b] and it is agreed by all that the phrase "Do it" even in a rabbinical ruling [not in the Torah] means that it should be done until one's life expires.' 'For He is thy master, and do homage unto Him' [Psalms 45: 12].

And to what extent he gave himself! To the point of distancing himself from the company of his household, and from his sons and his daughters. He sought but one source: the pure fear of God which resides between his shoulders [Deuteronomy 33: 12], to the point where in all his life he never asked his sons and daughters about their livelihoods or their situation. In all his life he did not write letters to them asking how they are. And if one of his sons came to him — even though the happiness was great, because they had not seen him for a year or two — he would nevertheless not ask him about the well being of his children, or his household or his livelihood. And when the son would rest up from a journey for an hour or so, father would warn him to make good the schedule of his learning, and told him: 'On the road you did not keep to your schedule of learning. It will be made up in my house!' 'And give him no rest' [Isaiah 62: 7].

Look, brothers, and see, how wonderful the goodness, delight, and taste are in the souls of those Godfearing who forsake the ways of *this* world and its concerns, to toil in the Torah and the commandments. They find sweetness and satisfaction. And it is enough to inspire them with an awesome strength to disconnect from the ways and pleasures of the world, to seclude themselves in the ways of

God and His Torah, until the sweetness and satisfaction that they find there free them from the excesses of nature. And they discard the bindings of the love of children, even if they are their only children. My late brother, the great rabbinic scholar, a straightforward and righteous man and fearer of God, our teacher Shloyme-Zalmen of blessed memory, when he was five or six years old, was tender and then an only son to his father. And his father loved him, and delighted in him all the time, for he recognized in him his qualities of goodness and righteousness. On one occasion, he fell ill. But father, the *Góen* of blessed memory, had previously decided to travel to the place he had prepared for seclusion, seven parasangs from the sacred city of Vilna, and it was before his son recovered. At first light of day [Genesis 44: 3] he traveled to that place where he would go as usual to be secluded, and where his natural instincts were shut off, until he forgot his house and his sons for more than a month. While there, he happened to go to the bath house, where, as is known, it is forbidden to think of matters of Torah, and he began to think about his own affairs, and remembered that he had been gone from his house on this trip more than a month, and his beloved son, who went about innocently in his ways, was separated from him, lying on his sick bed. His feelings of compassion were warmed. And he ordered that a wagon be prepared to return to his home, to find out about his son's well being. 'To know what be done for him' (Exodus 2: 4).

And know this and be clear, my friend the reader! That his Godfearingness and his Torah were at a much higher level of exactness than we have described here. We have not told the half of it! If we pay attention to all the things that he accomplished during the days of his life,

from beginning to end, you will see that in all of them he achieved standards of thoroughness and wholeness, whether it was through what he suffered by endangering himself in his war with the forces of his own body, or whether through the heavy demands of the workload he set for himself all his days: not to sleep more than two hours in any twenty-four hour period. And all his life he never slept more than a half hour at a time, and during that time his lips were whispering laws and commentaries. At the end of the half hour he became strong as a lion, washed his hands and began to study in a loud voice, and then he would sleep again for another half hour. And this was the limit of his sleep: three half hours a night; one half hour during the day.

And he had his shrewd tactics for fighting off his natural urges. Whatever his desire would crave, he would pass judgment on it, saying: it is not truly good! And he distanced himself from it, and he bowed his shoulder to bear [Genesis 49: 15] the pain of hunger and the stress of sleep deprivation. For he said: 'Come on, let us deal wisely with them' [a humorous reference to Exodus 1: 10].

His great brilliance and energies were placed in the serving of God, and this stood by him, against all that antagonized him, removing every worry and depression from him, to serve God in joy, in good spirits [Deuteronomy 28: 47] all the time. Every day, his profound comprehension was strengthened, until the opinion of his Maker was in agreement with him and he did nothing of his own volition, small or great.

On two occasions only I heard from his holy and pure mouth that his Maker's opinion did not agree with something he wished to do, and he did not do it. In his old age, I asked him many times why he did not travel to the Holy Land and he did not answer me. On one occasion I

pleaded with him extensively, and he answered me: 'I do not have permission from Heaven.'

And similarly, he had promised me that he would compile a compendium of final decisions from the four *Turim*, recording only the opinion that reflects the correct conclusion in his wise eyes, citing powerful, overwhelming and irrefutable evidence. I asked him about it several years before he passed away, and he answered me: 'I do not have permission from Heaven.' I commented that it would be the appropriate thing except that the generation does not look like the right one for it. 'Is it not God, He against whom we have sinned' [Isaiah 42: 24].

He did not attempt to enjoy anything, in thought, word or deed, unless it was from matters of gaining knowledge and fear of God and praise of his Creator, things from which genuine goodness and everlasting deliverance could result. And anything that did not fit into this he rejected with a resolute hand, and barred with a high arm [cf. Exodus 6: 1] from his place. 'And nothing escapeth them' [Joel 2: 4].

The elders of the generation, and the remnants of those who seek God, understood a little bit of his righteous ways while recognizing that he was verily a phenomenon, and that the way he conducted himself was heavenly and incomprehensible, even though they knew that 'his thoughts are not their thoughts and their ways are not his ways' [Isaiah 55: 8].

But in any case, they did not fail to pay attention to his routine, and they would desire and long to see him once a day or even once a week, to be able to gaze upon the work of God. So they would stand in line to observe from a distance his face [Ezekiel 14: 7]. Perhaps he would cause his face to shine upon them and favor them [Numbers 6: 25] with some words. 'Therefore my heart yearneth for him' [Jeremiah 31: 19].

There were always many from God's community, from all the places where they lived, with His Torah in their heart, who would come under the shadow of his roof [Genesis 19: 8], to pray in his studyhouse, to hear the praise of God from his mouth. They saw, and straightaway they were stunned [Psalms 48: 6] at how a person can reach, as he does, to such a level of loving God. As they observed, every single word of his prayer emanated from his mouth distinctly, in sanctity and in purity [prayerbook] with goodness of thought and honesty of heart. It seemed that knowledge was being added to him with every word, and the love of God was in every utterance of his tongue. They would always strive and seek to go in his ways and to serve God out of love as he does. They saw, however, and they realized, that there is no one in our generation strong enough to cleave unto his ways and they also understood clearly, that there cannot be conceived, by any law of chance, such immensity of knowledge and fineness of intellect, from very youth, with Torah and serving of God united in harmonious coexistence. 'Thou hast given him his heart's desire' [Psalms 21: 3].

From the day they entered his studyhouse, his first students wanted with all their might to draw close to the source of their strength. They were not lazy in walking there, nor did they weary of rushing to get there, because they felt mightily just how far removed they were from him, and they knew that the way would be exceedingly long for them, in reaching their desired objective [Psalms 107: 30]. 'How good is their portion, and how pleasant their lot' [prayerbook].

The first was the rabbinic genius, our teacher the rabbi Reb Chaim, may his light go forth, head of the rabbinical court of the sacred community of Valozhin, may it be protected and delivered by God. He would watch and

observe with a keen eye and with the beauty of the splendence of his Torah. He too had shown his might from his early youth, and he dwelt in the depths of the study of the laws [Talmud Megillo 3b], and his hands were up to the task [Deuteronomy 33: 7] for discussion of the Torah, and finding his dwelling place in its shade. And bound together with him was his humility and fear of God [Proverbs 22: 4] all of the time. And when he presented himself before him to hear from his mouth the words of the living God, a spirit of understanding from father (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come) passed upon his face, and his sharpwittedness and discussion were purified, and by his understanding he smote through the pride [Job 26: 12]. And from then on he looked at things with a deeper understanding. How great were his accomplishments, and how deep his thoughts in the revealed and in the esoteric wisdom. Under the shadow of father's roof [Genesis 19: 8] he resided. 'For that was his desire' [cf. Psalm 132: 13].

And the second, the rabbinic genius our teacher the rabbi Reb Shloyme of blessed memory, head of the rabbinical court of Volkemir [= Vilkomir, now Ukmergė, Lithuania], sharpwitted and expert in the chambers of the Torah, and crowned with humility and fear of sin. Many times during the year he would knock on father's door. When he heard the words of truth in their true meaning coming out of his sacred and pure mouth, he considered his own labor that he had labored during his life to be "labor that is of no account and feeble" [1 Samuel 15: 9]. And when he presented himself before him in the sacred place [of study, the Gaon's *kloyz*], he asked him about everything that was difficult for him to understand. And he gave him 'sufficient for his need that which he wanteth' [Deuteronomy 15: 8].

And the third, the rabbinic genius, the righteous and humble man, our teacher the rabbi, Reb Shloyme-Zalmen (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come), the brother of the rabbinic genius Reb Chaim mentioned above. When he came before father, all his powers were humbled. Before entering within the sacred enclosure [Mishna Zvokhim 5 (3) etc.], even though no secret was hidden [Daniel 4: 6] from him, a mantle of humility became his mantle. A master of modesty and ethics. No beloved attribute was missing. And what is more beloved than wisdom and honor? His good name. Beloved in Heaven and cherished on earth, and father (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come) loved him as he loved his own life. His love for him was greater than for all his other students. "And God had given him rest" [11 Samuel 7: 1, a reference to Shloyme-Zalmen's early death].

And the fourth, the rabbi, the great and outstanding in Torah and fear of God, the famous, our teacher Reb Saadye (may his light go forth), brother-in-law of the rabbinic genius our teacher Shloyme-Zalmen mentioned above. He left his home, and came to hear father's Torah. And he ministered to father for many years, and he learned from him much every single day, and when he came before the king with the book [Esther 9: 25], with a question, father would show him the explanation.

And the fifth, the rabbi, the Great Light, the famous, our teacher, Shloyme, of blessed memory of Talotshin [Taločín, Belarus] "who declareth his word unto Jacob" [or: the *magid*, or preacher, to the people of Israel; Psalm 147: 19] in the sacred community of Vilna, how much overflowing good-friendship was shown to

him when father studied with him the Zohar and the Book of Creation. And everything that was difficult for him in the writings of the disciples of the Arizál [Ari z"l = Ari of blessed memory = kabbalist Isaac Luria, 1534—1572], he explained to him according to his abilities and the nature of his knowledge. But he kept certain things from him and did not tell him everything. And after Reb Shloyme passed away, father had second thoughts, and said: Why did I hide from him those hidden things? Was he not with all his might Godfearing from his youth? 'For He repays man according to his work' [Job 34: 11].

And the sixth, the great rabbi, the sharpwitted, expert, famous, our teacher Tsvi-Hirsh may his light go forth, of Semyatitz [Simyatitsh, now Siemiatycze, Poland]. Great is his strength in the revealed and in the esoteric. He studied under father for many years. He cleaved to some of the ways of his piety and separateness. 'And so it was befitting for him' [Passover Haggadah].

And the seventh, the great rabbi, the sharpwitted, expert, famous, our teacher Reb Shloyme of blessed memory from the sacred community of Mohilov [Molev, now Mohilev, Belarus]. He was well armed in the war of Torah, fearing and trembling before the word of God. His face was a face aflame [Isaiah 13: 8] with the power of his fear and serving of God. He learned very much from father, and from the time he came to him, he remained a steady pupil of his.

Blessed are you, O Vilna, City of Splendor [Jeremiah 49: 25, said of Jerusalem]. Everybody, from the greatest to the smallest, acquired some benefit to their soul, each according to his level. And in all their achievements in the study of Torah and the giving of charity, he was the force behind it, with the might of his

Godfearingness and his reproving them to their faces. For his inspired word of advice would rise up before them 'till the moon be no more' [Psalms 72: 7].

With his words of advice and his reproof they were made into a great community of expanders of the realm of Torah: people who take care in carrying out the Commandments; people who hate studying for the sake of practical gain [Mishna, Sayings of the Fathers 1: 10]; people who honor God. Their heart did not turn proud when they acquired any wealth. Everyone who seeks God rejoices in them. They made their study of Torah into their regular and principal undertaking, and their businesses into a secondary concern. And their businesses are run by the members of their household. Torah and serving God are their only actual 'business.'

At first his teaching was primarily for those close to him, but later, the entire country accepted him as their leader, and proclaimed it also for the people afar: not to waste their time in useless pursuits; for each person to keep his eyes focused on the division of one's time, down to precise minutes! And to spend time only for the most valuable things possible, and that is the busying of oneself with the study of Torah and serving of God, to be energetic in it, to accomplish things with the maximum of diligence. For any endeavor and talent to do things other than in this field will bring no benefit.

Is it not the case that one's own mind, in its attempts to serve God will only, after all, recognize evil in others and heap praise on oneself? Only through the Torah and serving God can one weaken the machinations of the evil desires of a person's heart and all the tricks they play on us. And the growth of charity and of splendor can be seen in his city and place, and even in faraway places, where they did not see his greatness and his good-

ness, but sought with all their strength to go about their days in accordance with the conduct that he taught them.

How many fine qualities has the place [after Passover Haggadah] where he stood before God in Torah and the serving of God for more than fifty years! And how much extra love has accrued to this City of Splendor [Jeremiah 49: 25] that became his partner, to receive the resplendence of his wisdom, and the magnificence continuously radiating from his face? They received a measure of his attention upon them, according to the measure of their efforts to draw close to what is sacred, to make good their affairs, in order that they might walk in the way of the good.

And so it was for the scholars, the 'watcher and holy one' [Daniel 4: 10, 20] of the sacred community of Shklov. People understood that their confusion came from the domain of excessive *pilpul*. One person builds up an argument, and along comes another and demolishes it. And they were assisted by father, the *Góen* (the memory of a virtuous person is a blessing for life in the world to come). They looked and saw that he succeeded in attaining many things in which the scholar of Torah for its own sake succeeds [Mishna, Sayings of the Fathers 6: 1]. For the secrets of the Torah were revealed to him. And they benefited from his advice and insight. And all of the innovations in his study of Torah derive from the source of accuracy. 'His waters are certain' [Isaiah 33: 16] and 'there is in his words nothing crooked or sly' [Proverbs 8: 8]. Without fail, he gets right to the heart of his subject.

'Knowledge is easy to him who understands' [Proverbs 14: 6]. Is he not the phenomenal one in Torah and serving of God, the prince, famous for his praises, 'a valiant man who has done mighty deeds' [II Samuel 23:

20], 'sacred fruit for giving praise' [Leviticus 19: 24], his honor our teacher Benyomin may his light go forth, of the sacred community of Shklov. He went up to live in the sacred community of Vilna to give pleasure to his Creator. 'And his sleep fled from his eyes' [Genesis 31: 40]. And he succeeded to listen to father's sacred and pure mouth in his studies, and the light of father's Torah and Godfearingness shone upon him from that time onward, in his way and in his conduct.

And through him the sacred community of Shklov was built on its own mound [cf. Jeremiah 30: 18; image best known from the sixteenth century kabbalistic Sabbath poem *L'kho doydi*]. They accepted upon themselves much of his methodology in scholarship, and the correct ways of fulfilling commandments. Many of the people of his (Benyomin's) city [Shklov] and his country [Raysn, eastern sector of Jewish Lithuania] followed the lead of the abovementioned rabbi Reb Benyomin, but it did not work out for them to become intimate [themselves] with sanctity.

The will of God permitted only two brothers to succeed, and they are, of course: the great rabbi, phenomenal in Torah and Godfearingness, his study achieving wholeness, the renowned and praised, our teacher Simkhe-Bunim, may God watch over him and deliver him; and his brother, the rabbi, great in Torah and serving of God, 'that feedeth among the roses' [Song of Songs 2: 16] wisdom and understanding, 'with all powders of the merchant' [Song of Songs 3: 6], renowned and praised, our teacher Menachem-Mendel, may God watch over him and deliver him. For they are mighty men of valor, fulfillers of his word [Psalms 103: 20]. Trembling before the word of God, to serve Him and to guard it day and night [Genesis 2: 15].



They entered into his shelter in the days of his old age, as the sun was setting [Genesis 28: 11] and the day declineth [Jeremiah 6: 4], at eventide [Genesis 8: 11]. At the shining of [Habakkuk 3: 11] the magnificence of his Torah and wisdom, they beheld a great light [Isaiah 9:1]. They gave nights as days to unearth the deepest darkness: all the doubts in the Mishna and the Tosefta, in the Mechilta and Sifra and Sifrei and in the Jerusalem Talmud and the four *Turim*. 'Lo mine eye hath seen all this' [Job 13: 1]. And upon them and upon me there dripped down [Job 29: 22] the light of his Torah. And father of blessed memory heard their voice 'going about in the garden' [Genesis 3: 8] of the Torah, and found their intentions and deeds to be desirable before God, and shared with them his wishes, and besides that he was wise he taught his knowledge to the people [Ecclesiastes 12: 9], and strengthened and inspired them to study with proper orderliness so their feet would not stumble [II Samuel 22: 37].

First of all, he urged that in carrying out the serving of blessed God, one must be expert first of all in the twenty-four books [of the Hebrew Bible] with all the vowel points and the accents, properly arranged in every respect and carefully followed. And he would test them in all this and, beyond that, the science of grammar. Those who excelled in consummate knowledge of the science of grammar had previously tested father, and when they spoke to him, they could not find their hands or their feet! They drank his words with thirst. Their rash arguments were undone as if they had never even existed, and upon returning to their abodes, they would reply to people and say: Whosoever did not hear his words does not see [Exodus 22: 9] and does not know [Ecclesiastes 9: 1].

Then he ordered that the six orders of the Mishna should flow from a person's mouth, together with the major commentaries. And on top of that, with the correct textual variants! His great students saw that the wisdom of the Almighty is in him, for with his great capability and the power of his sharpwittedness to discover the truth of the Torah, he came forward with discoveries that our forefathers in their earlier commentaries did not even imagine, and he produced tangible evidence from the structure of the subjects within the Mishna or from the seeming duplication of words. And they recognized that those who know the roots and principles pursue a straightforward path, without resorting to farfetched explanations.

Then he warned about the methods of analysis applied to the 'sea of Talmud': to search carefully in the comments of Rashi for they are very straightforward to the person who can comprehend them; and, to the innovations of the writers of the *Tosyfos* of blessed memory, a principal condition being that they be studied with straightforward logic.

He hated the proliferation of argumentative challenges for their own sake, and he conceded the truth even when it came from the mouths of little children at school. All of the best conclusions derived from following one's logic did not count for him as much as the truth, for only when it was understood would he feel that he had succeeded and grown wiser in his studies. And he ordered that one refrain from the method of study that tries to sharpen the mind just for the sake of it, even for weak students and young children. It is moreover the case that when accomplished, sharpwitted Talmudists heard words of truth coming from his sacred and pure mouth, they were left speechless, and said: 'For we have achieved nothing [Isaiah 49: 4] all the days of our lives' [Ecclesiastes 6: 12].

And to bring his generation to wholeness, he established a house full of Torah, so that there would be people perpetually standing at their positions around the table of God [Malachi 1: 7], full of sap and freshness [Psalms 92: 15], in all realms of Torah, as they study from the Bible, Mishna and Gemora. And he himself would sit with them at the head of the table at set times. And he would set out before them, at the table, the schedule of their study, explaining how they could achieve comprehensive knowledge of the entire Talmud in a few years, and know the [Talmudic] source of the laws and the rulings in all four *Turim* perfectly. And he warned them not to busy themselves much with vacuous argument that will in any case be dropped in the end, and on those occasions when it is used, heaven forbid, just to tease and provoke. These practices are hugely antagonistic to the will of the Almighty, for iniquity would multiply [Proverbs 6: 35] in their midst. Sin would increase, the pleasant interconnectedness [of the simple meaning of a text] would be lost and the truth banished from the flock of God. Still, pilpul can have its certain elementary use in attuning one to the study of law.

And they fulfilled it, and accepted it upon themselves [Esther 9: 27], and studied in their lives the eighteen years he was with them in their house. And he had the pleasure of seeing his good will carried out. And they, looking upon the magnificence of his Torah evening and morning, merited that wonderful joy, a joy and delight that cannot be imagined. Woe unto children who have been expelled from such a table of their father!

This is our consolation, that we lived to see the light of his Torah in his commentaries on the four sections of the *Shulkhon órukh*, and, may we now all be privileged to have pleasure from their radiance. Blessed is he

who waits, and then reaches the light of his Torah, that his springwaters may flow about widely [Proverbs 5: 16], and to give drink to the sacred flock, who desire to have pleasure from the splendor of his wisdom in the revealed and in the esoteric wisdom. The greatness of his wisdom cannot be imagined. One cannot reach the end of his comprehension. One cannot recount the extent of his sanctity, and the paths he chose in matters of the sacred. 'But the smallest part thereof' [Numbers 23: 13] have we recounted here, and but a few of his praises, 'as a drop in a bucket' [Isaiah 40: 15].

He who implanted the ear [Psalms 94: 9], may he open my ears, and pierce them to be able to listen to even a little of his learning. He who created the eye [Psalms 94: 9], may he enlighten my eyes to understand even a little of his meanings.

These be the words of his sons, who come as witnesses and set their seal; our hands 'dropping with flowing myrrh' [Song of Songs 5: 13]; 'and our knees smiting one against the other' [Daniel 5: 6]. And our whole body trembles, 'even as a reed is shaken in the water' [I Kings 14: 15] from the sanctity of the memory of his holiness, and praise of the deeds of his pure hands.

*Yehude-Leyb son of the true Gaon, the righteous, our
master Eyliohu, who rests in Paradise.*

*Avrohom son of the true Gaon, the righteous, our
master Eyliohu, who rests in Paradise.*



It is evident that Yehude-Leyb and Avrohom, the sons of the Gaon who penned this “mother of Gaon biographies,” felt they needed to address their painful disappointment that their father never did compile a massive new code of Jewish law as had Maimonides, the Tur and more recently Joseph Karo. More than two centuries after the Gaon’s death, teams of scholars continue to work to put together his works, notes, and notes of his students into accessible published form with the necessary commentary and explanation for the use of scholars. Most prolifically, the brothers Rabbi Nechemiah and Rabbi Samuel Jacob Feffer, of New York and Bnai Brak, are producing a massive series of impressive volumes. Others, including Rabbi Yedidiya Frankel of Jerusalem, are scouring the globe for access to printed works and manuscripts which contain the Gaon’s handwriting. During a 2003 visit to Vilnius, Rabbi Frankel explained one of his recent discoveries which he had been chasing for years over three continents: a printed book with one set of brackets, corrected several times so as to move the location of the brackets in the text. These brackets and the adjustments in their location, in the Gaon’s hand, represent his reconstruction of the original text by bracketing those segments he believed to have “fallen in” through a typographical error, and how his reconstruction evolved over the years. The changes have a legal effect on the law being discussed. Such is the state of the Gaon’s literary legacy. One possible biographical explanation for the Gaon’s not having compiled a systematic compendium is given at the start of the next chapter.

But the comparison of the classic Sephardi Joseph Karo (1488—1575), and the classic Litvak Eyliohtu the Gaon of Vilna (1720—1797) does not end with discussions of the history of Jewish law and their compilations into systematic compendiums. Both were avowed mystics in addition to being top legal minds. Karo left behind one mystical tome, the *Mágid Meyshórim* (*Maggid Meshárim*, “Speaker of Righteousness” after Isaiah 45: 19). The Gaon of Vilna left behind a vast corpus of mystical writings. It is perhaps ironic that in the realm of Kabbalah, it was the Gaon who managed to complete a series of systematic works. But the issue here is not “who did more” even if these two top minds from different centuries and different European Jewish cultures have often been compared. It is to elucidate something special about the Gaon which has become emblematic of Lithuanian Jewry.

Karo’s kabbalistic tome is a kind of mystical autobiography. It talks about the *mágid*, or preacher (literally “teller” from the classical Hebrew for “tells” or “telling” as in Isaiah 45: 19) who came to him for over fifty years, usually at night, revealing to him the true law in doubtful cases, as well as mystical secrets. In a classic document about the Gaon of Vilna’s experience with his special messenger from Heaven, things turn out very differently. The document is by the Gaon’s pupil, Chaim of Valozhin, and was written as an introduction to the Gaon’s commentary on the kabbalistic *Sifro d’Tsniuso* (*Sifra de-Tzeniuta* or Book of Secrecy, on Genesis). In what is perhaps the classic case of the folkloristic trait of stubborn-

ness, pride and the ethic of one's own hard work instead of hocus-pocus as attributes of the archetypal Litvak, Chaim Valozhiner has this to say about his teacher's encounters with the old *mágid* from Heaven:

"It did not seem good to him [the Gaon of Vilna] to achieve something other than by his own hard work, that he would toil for with wisdom, knowledge and talent, and that results from huge effort. And when Heaven trusted him, and wellsprings of wisdom were revealed unto him, the most secret of the secrets and the most mysterious of the mysteries, this was for him a gift of God, but with one exception, he did not want them. Even when they wanted to convey to him from Heaven without any hard work or effort of the flesh those secrets and mysteries, the highest of the high, via *magidim* who are masters of mysteries and Princes of the Torah, he would not countenance it. It was given to him and he rejected it.

For I heard from his holy lips that on many occasions they agreed to release to him a number of *magidim* from Heaven, with a mission to convey to him secrets of the Torah without his having to work for them. But he would not even listen to them. One of the *magidim* was extremely insistent. Nevertheless, he would not look at his fantastic appearance, and replied: 'I do not want my comprehension of His Torah (may His name be blessed), by way of any intermediaries whatsoever. My eyes are raised to Him (blessed be His name). What he wants to

reveal to me and to give me as a portion of His (blessed be His name) Torah, through my hard work that I have toiled with all my might, He (blessed be His name) will give me wisdom from His lips, knowledge and understanding, a heart that understands, and a consciousness that streams, and I will know that I have found grace in His eyes. I do not want anything that is not from His lips, and the insights that come from angels and *magidim* and Princes of Torah for which I did not work and use my intelligence, these I do not want!'

On one occasion, our master sent me to my younger brother who was greater than me in every sense of sacred goodness, our brilliant teacher the rabbi, Shloyme-Zalmen (the memory of the righteous is a blessing for the World to Come), to tell him as a command in his [the Gaon's] name, not to receive any angel or *mágid* that might come to him, for in the not too distant future he too would be visited by one [...].

And even more than that, he [the Gaon] used to say, that when the soul acquires wondrous and awesome insights while a person is asleep, by way of the rising of the soul to enjoy the highest pleasures of the heavenly academies, it is not considered by him to be something essential. Because the essential thing is what a human being acquires here in This World by way of hard work and labor when he chooses the right path and concentrates himself [...]."

Chaim of Valozhin, 1820

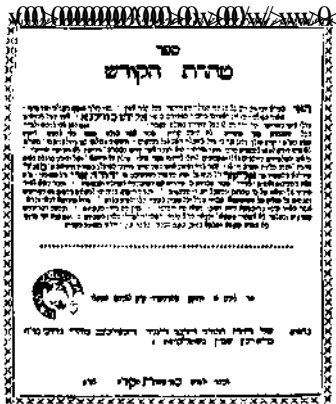
The Gaon's Works

The number of works written by Elyohu the Gaon of Vilna depends on how the counting is done. None was published in his lifetime, and many were commentaries to other works which were eventually published together with those other works in the traditional layout of commentaries “surrounding” the basic text of a more ancient work. Some of the Gaon’s later published commentaries reflect the reconstructions of notes and memories by his pupils, rendering the counting process even more complicated.

Still, there is a general consensus that he created some seventy works, of which about fifty have appeared in print. Some are being published now, and others republished in a more accurate form (taking into account extant variants), thanks to the “Machon Ha-Gró” project of the brothers Feffer (Nehemiah and Samuel Jacob Feffer, of Bnai Brak, Israel and Brooklyn, New York). They have published numerous volumes of what will hopefully become the complete surviving works of the Gaon of Vilna.



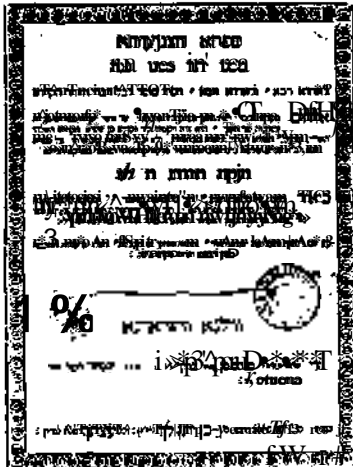
The Dubrovna 1804 edition of the Five Books of Moses (the *Khamesh*, or Pentateuch), containing the Gaon’s commentary, here called *Adעתו Elyohu* (“Mantle of Elijah” after II Kings 2: 13, 14), advertised, as it were, on the title page, as the second in the list of thirteen commentaries appended to the Biblical text.



The Gaon on law

Bodleian Library Oxford

The Zholkva (Zolkiev) 1804 edition of the Gaon's *Taharas ha-Kodesh* ("Purity of Holiness" after I Chronicles 23: 28), a commentary on the Tosefta (compilation of Mishna-era texts not included in the actual canon of the Mishna), on a tractate on matters of holiness. The brief introduction on this title page explains that the Gaon imparted his comments to a small circle of students, and that this text exists thanks to Meir of Vilna, one of the Gaon's pupils and assistants, who is, it is explained, a descendant of Yehude-Arye of "Shad in the land of Zamet" (Shat, now Šeta, in the Žemaitija area of western Lithuania).



The Gaon on mysticism

Bodleian Library Oxford

The Gaon's kabbalistic commentary on the *Sifra d'Tzniuso* ("Book of Secrecy") component of the primary text of Kabbalah, the Zohar. This section, and the Gaon's commentary, deal with the mysteries of creation of the universe.

This edition, with the Gaon's commentary "surrounding" the original, was published in 1820 by Menachem-Man son of Boruch, a leading founder of the Romm family of printers. During this period, their press functioned in both Grodna, where it was founded, and Vilna, where it had moved and was to flourish right up to the Second World War.

The Gaon's treatise on trigonometry and algebra, published in Vilna and Grodna in 1833, also by Menachem-Man, co-founder of the Romms. The work is called *Ayil meshulosh*. The term comes from the book of Genesis (15: 9), where it is translated "a ram three years old." The title invokes a word play on *meshulosh*, which also came to mean "triangle."



The Gaon on mathematics

Bodleian Library Oxford

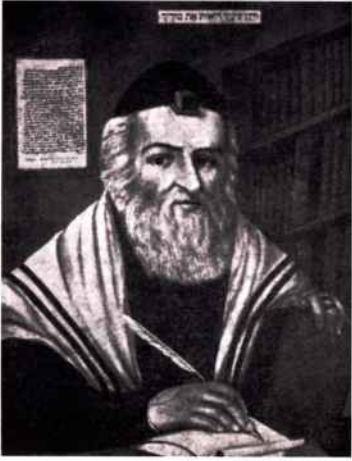
Seven faces of the Gaon of Vilna

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During the nineteenth century, it became popular in many Lithuanian Jewish homes to hang a portrait of the Gaon of Vilna. The custom of adorning the home with “pictures of national heroes” was borrowed from Christian neighbors, and represented in some sense a loosening of an age-old taboo against depiction of the human form, derived from Exodus 20:4 — “Thou shalt not make unto thee an idol, nor any picture of likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth below . . .” The Biblical prohibition obviously applies to idolatry and not to pictures in the modern sense. This was one of the symbolic points on which Jewish Lithuanian tradition became more lenient.

These are but seven of the dozens of “Gaons” imagined by artists who never saw him. Note that he is sometimes portrayed wearing the traditional *tfilin* (*tefillin*, phylacteries) of the head and *tallis* (prayershawl). The *tfilin* are worn on the head and the weaker arm by males over the age of majority during weekday morning prayer, and by some sages during study and scribal work as well.

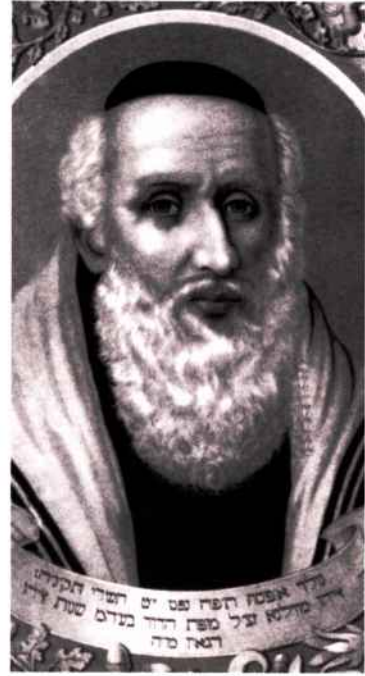
There is only one picture of the Gaon that was drawn from life. It appears later in this volume (see p. 139).



Leyzer Ran Collection



Leyzer Ran Collection



Leyzer Ran Collection

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Leyzer Ran Collection

These seven images were created by later artists



Leyzer Ran Collection



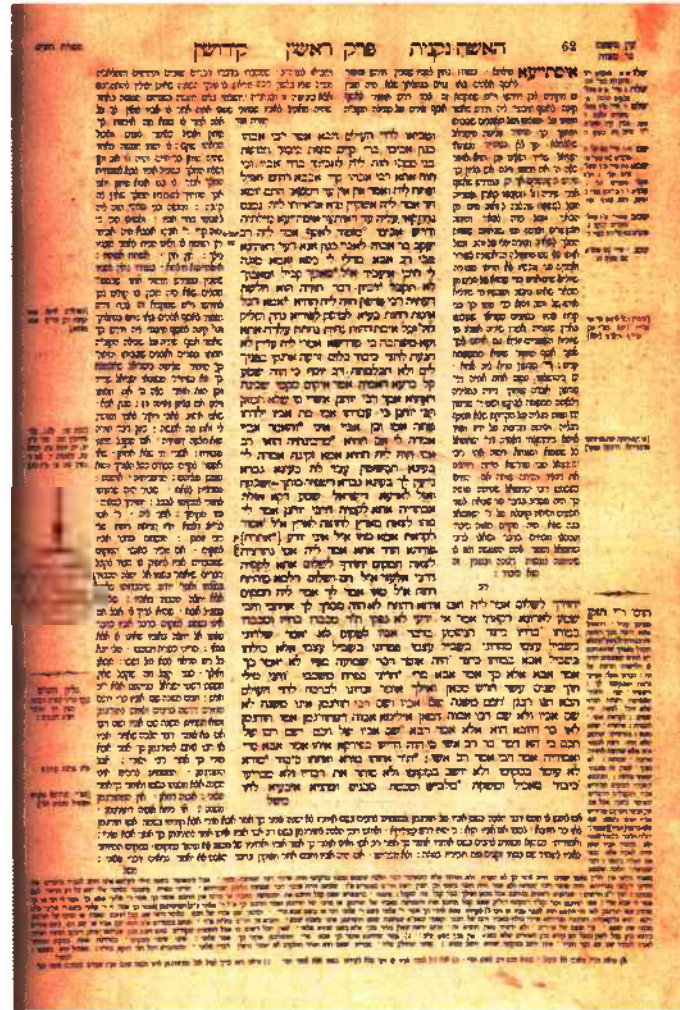
Leyzer Ran Collection



Leyzer Ran Collection

Talmud

A typical page (much reduced!) of the famed Romm Vilna edition of the Babylonian Talmud. The central column is the Aramaic *Gemora*. The Talmudic text (in square Hebrew characters) is surrounded by commentaries (in rabbinic type font known as “Rashi script”). Most prominent among them are the commentaries of Rashi (without large type drop-cap words — in this page on the left), and *Tóysfes*, compilations of medieval rabbinic commentaries from Old Ashkenaz (identifiable by the larger letters at the start of new sections — in this case at the right). The Gaon of Vilna’s commentary here (as usual!) comprises a tiny paragraph (marked by the added arrow and circle), in which he cites the sources necessary to solve the difficulties arising from the discussion. It is typical for a few words of the Gaon to resolve issues that other commentators grappled with for centuries, and it is typical for him to do it through a few cross references. This page is 31b from the tractate *Kidushin* (laws of betrothal and marriage).



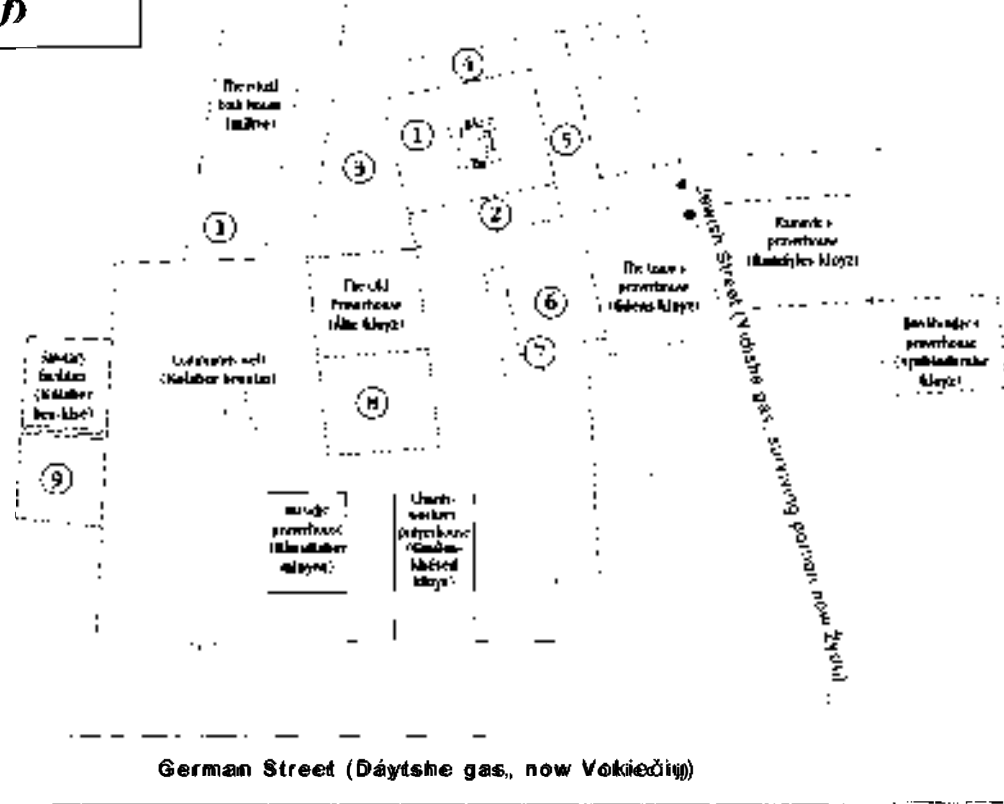
The *Vilner ShulHeyff*

In the days of ancient Israel, there were no *synagogues*. There were various central tabernacles, most famously at Shiloh in the time of the Judges, followed by King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. It was after the destruction of the Temple in 586 BC, and the exile to Babylonia, that local houses of prayer apparently developed. It is not until around the first century AD that the *synagogue* is a widely known and stable concept. In Jewish culture, the idea is traditionally traced back to a passage in Ezekiel, the first prophet to arise in the exile: "Thus saith the Lord God: 'Although I have removed them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet have I been to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come'" (Ezekiel 11: 16). The concept of "little sanctuary" has come to mean the local *synagogue*, reflecting the historic shift from statehood to dispersion.

For the Jews of Lithuania, there was, in addition to all the local and diverse prayerhouses across the land, the closest thing Europe ever had to a spiritual "temple mount." That was the *Vilner Shul-heyf*, the "synagogue courtyard" of the Great *Synagogue* in Vilna. The Yiddish term *Shul-heyf* (*Shul-hoyf* in Standard Yiddish, *shúleji* in rapid speech) always has a ring of sanctity and warmth. Combined with the enchanted force of the word "Vilna," its awesomeness was more intense still.

**Great Synagogue
Courtyard in Vilna
(*Vilner Shul-beyf*)**

1. The Great Synagogue
(*di gréyze shul* or *di shtot-shul*
"the city synagogue")
2. Antechamber
(*pólish*)
3. Women's section 1
(*ézas-nóshim*, downstairs)
4. Women's section 2
(*ézas-nóshim*, on two floors)
5. The Matisyohu Strashun library
(*Strashún biblyoték*)
6. Undertakers' prayerhouse
(*kabrónishe kloyz*)
7. Women's section of Gaon's
prayerhouse
(*ézas-nóshim*)
8. The New Prayerhouse/
Yesod's Prayerhouse
(*di náye kloyz/*
dem Yesóds kloyz)
9. Workmen's Society Prayerhouse
(*Kloyz khévre póyalim*)



After D. Maggid (1901)
by Giedre Beconyté

Gítke Táybe's Streetlet
(*Gítke-Táybes zavúlik*, now Mikalojaus)

Section of the *Vilner Shul-heyf*, heart of the city's Jewish Quarter. The courtyard was an L-shaped area facing onto the narrow *Yidishe gas* ("Jewish Street," now *Žydų gatvė* in Vilnius), and backing onto *Daytshe gas* ("German Street," now *Vokiečių*). But this part of *Yidishe gas* no longer exists. Before the war, this narrow street continued right into *Daytshe gas* (see map on p. 114).

The Great Synagogue, known throughout Lithuania as *Di greyse shul* (the "great synagogue") was at the heart of the *Vilner Shul-heyf*. Vilna's Jews preferred

the simpler name *Di shtot-shul* ("the city synagogue"). It was a magnificent structure, built in 1573. To maintain lofty proportions without violating restrictions on height imposed by the authorities, the floor was sunk beneath ground level, and steps led down into the grand structure, built in the spirit of Italian renaissance. Perhaps its magnificence seemed that much greater for being situated in a small area of winding little streetlets and alleyways packed solid with little religious, communal and historic structures that gave spiritual sustenance far and wide.

The Great Synagogue of Vilna has been the focus of many legends. On one part of its roof, an old cannonball stood for a century and a half. People (not only Jews) came from far and wide to see it. The story told goes back to Russia's siege of Vilna in

1792. When Catherine II's forces were raining cannon fire on the old city, as many Jews as could fit huddled into the Great Synagogue. An emissary convinced the reclusive Gaon of Vilna, who was not a frequenter of places with large crowds, to come and lead a prayer for safety. Elyohu opened the sacred ark and led the people in reciting Psalm 20 seven times. Just then, a cannonball hit the *Greyse shul*, landing harmlessly on the roof, where it was to remain until the destruction of Jewish Vilna by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

The Great Synagogue was not the oldest structure in the *Vilner shul-heyf*. It had been built adjacent to the older prayerhouse which subsequently became known as *Kloyz yoshn* ("The Little Old Prayerhouse"). According to the community's records, the *Kloyz yoshn* had been erected around 1440.

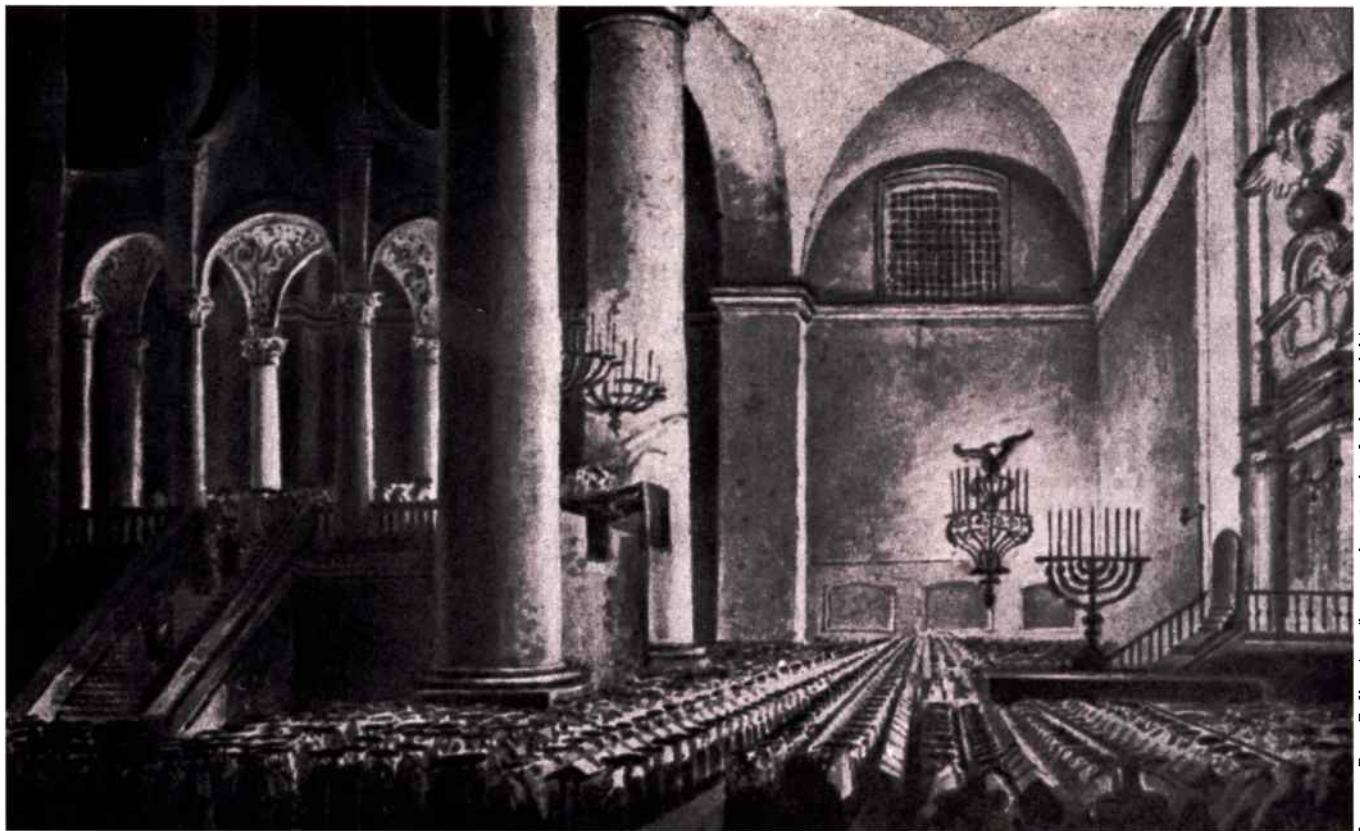


The *Vilner Shul-heyf*



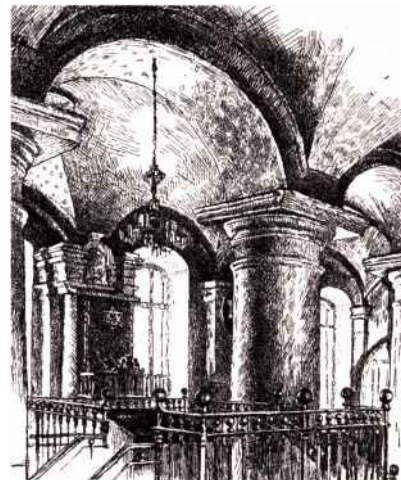
Leyzer Ran Collection from a drawing

Inside the Great Vilna Synagogue



Leyzer Ran Collection from a drawing by L. Antokolski

Inside the Great Vilna Synagogue



Leyzer Ran Collection

View of the bima

The *Kloyz-yoshn* was itself joined by a new *kloyz*, built in the middle 1750s, endowed by the *Yesód*, a well-known Vilna philanthropist whose acronymic comes from his name and professions: *Yehudo safro ye-dayono* (Aramaic for “Judah the scribe and judge”). A doorway was built linking the new and old *kloyz*.

In 1800, three years after the Gaon of Vilna’s death, the community built a studyhouse on the site of his own house. Nobody knows whether this was a remodeling or a case of razing and rebuilding from scratch. Be that as it may, a classic Vilna custom developed, and in some Lithuanian Jewish sense, *dem Goens kloyz* (“The Gaon’s Little Studyhouse”) came to represent the ideals of this culture even more than the Great Synagogue. In memory of the Gaon, it was made



inside *kloyz yoshn* (the
“little old prayerhouse”)

into a place where ten scholars at a time (the number of the traditional Jewish *mínyn* or prayer quorum) would be immersed in studying twenty-four hours a day. When one participant left, he was immediately replaced by another. This special group of scholars were men who had decided to live their lives in the spirit of the Gaon, and take periods of time away from their wives and families and other pursuits, to devote themselves entirely to study. They were known as *dem Góens prúshim*

(“the Gaon’s *prúshim*,” plural of *póresh* “one who withdraws from the concerns of this world to be immersed in study”). From 1800 until the Holocaust, ten of the Gaon’s *prúshim* sat at the long table here, day and night, night and day.

There were many other prayerhouses and studyhouses in the *Vilner Shul-heyf*, including: the *Shive-krúim* (“the seven called,” named for the practice of keeping the number of those called to bless the Torah Sabbath mornings to the traditional seven, unlike some places where the number was increased because distribution of this honorific function yielded contributions); the *Kabrónishe kloyz* (gravediggers’ prayerhouse); *Gmiles-khésed* (prayerhouse of the society to help poor people); *Malárske* (painters’ prayerhouse); *Khsidim-shtibl* (the Hasidic prayerhouse).

In addition to the many prayerhouses, the *Vilner Shul-heyf* was home to the offices of the Vilna Jewish Community, the *bes-din* (*bézdin*, the rabbinical court), and an array of social, philanthropic and academic institutions. The community well and ritual bath houses were also located in the courtyard.

In 1902, the famed Vilna library of Matisyohu (Mathias) Strashun (see p. 188) was relocated from its original home to a purpose built library built on to the great synagogue. Its collection included Talmudic and Kabbalistic tracts as well as Vilna's best collection of modern Judaica in many languages. The modern Hebrew and Yiddish movements naturally had their own social and cultural gathering places, apart from the religious traditionalists of the Great Synagogue Courtyard. But when it came to reading, studying and libraries, the universal Lithuanian Jewish love of learning overcame political and ideological schisms. At the Strashun Library, venerable long-bearded rabbis sat happily alongside modernist scholars and students who were immersed in study of all kinds of books and subjects. And so it came to pass that in one fell swoop a cherished intellectual address of modern Jewish Vilna found itself in the heart of the city's central *Shul-heyf*.

The scholar who best fathomed the historic import of the *Vilner Shul-heyf*, and who worked very hard every day for it to become a harmonious home for modern as well as traditional Jewish learning, was the famed librarian of the Strashun Library, Chaikel (Khaykl) Lunski. Born into a family of scholars in Slonim around 1881, he was a child prodigy who was appointed librarian of the Strashun Library as a teenager in the mid 1890s. In that role, he became known in Lita as

At the start of the twentieth century, the famed Strashun Library was relocated to this purpose built structure which was built on to the Great Synagogue. The spindles, a familiar architectural detail of the synagogue's roof area, remained visible above the library.



Leyzer Ran Collection

der shéymer fun Yerusholdyim d'Lite (the Guardian — Vilna Yiddish *shéymer* for standard *shóymer*) of Jerusalem of Lithuania. In 1916 he published his classic piece about the *Shul-heyyf* enumerating its dazzling array of spiritual, educational, religious and social activities. His knowledge of every book and every detail in the cultural history of Lithuanian Jewry became known internationally, and he was “the first address” of innumerable foreign visitors. With the rest of Vilna Jewry, Lunski was incarcerated in the Vilna Ghetto in 1941. The “Little Ghetto” where the Great Synagogue and the Strashun Library were located, was liquidated shortly thereafter. Lunski was transferred to the “Large Ghetto” and swiftly renewed his work as “librarian to the people” in the reading hall on Strashun Street (now Žemaitijos gatvė) which was to exist up until the final annihilation of the Vilna Ghetto in September 1943. The incarcerated, hungry, suffering and doomed Jews of the Vilna Ghetto celebrated the borrowing of the Ghetto library’s one hundred thousandth book on 13 December 1942. There are different accounts of Lunski’s death. Some reported that he was tortured to death in the ghetto in 1943. Others recounted that he took his own life rather than be transported. In a letter dated December 31st 1941 he had written to Vilna Ghetto diarist Herman Kruk: “Thinking of the thousands of innocent, pure people murdered in Ponar [the infamous killing ground outside Vilna] *af kīdlesh-hashém* (sanctification of God’s name), of the destruction of all our holy things, the destruction of our cultural institutions, and so on, I do not want to live. Rather than be killed by a murderous hand in the pits at Ponar, it is better to kill myself and at least have a Jewish grave.” (See the reference to the recently published English translation of Herman Kruk’s diary in the bibliography at the end of this volume.)

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Chaikel Lunski, the “Guardian of
Jerusalem of Lithuania”

Leyzor Ran Collection

Scant Remnants in Today's Vilnius

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The Gaon of Vilna's "miniature mausoleum," like most of the old Jewish cemetery of Vilna, survived the Holocaust but was destroyed by Soviet authorities, when the old Jewish cemetery was obliterated to make way for a stadium (the building still stands). The original gravestones of the Gaon and his immediate family were moved to the new Jewish cemetery (some think that these graves were moved twice after the war). Visitors from around the world come to visit and pray at the site. Many leave personal notes containing wishes, hopes and questions, according to an old tradition of leaving notes at the most hallowed graves.



Rita Puišytė

The Gaon's gravestone today



David Katz

A colorful poster indicating which chapters of Psalms are to be recited on which days of the year according "to the custom of the *Gro*." *Gro* is an acronym for the Gaon, Reb Elyihu (the Gaon of Vilna). This poster belonged to the Beys Yankev (Beth Jacob) congregation of leather workers before the war. It now hangs in the *Khor-shul*, the only functioning synagogue in Vilnius, on Pylimo Street (known in Yiddish by its prewar name, *Zaválne*). By most counts, there were 105 synagogues in town before the war, in addition to many smaller prayer rooms and studyhouses.

A surviving prewar poster with the Gaon's instructions

Hasidim and Misnagdim

The Gaon of Vilna never did collect all his many Talmudic insights and rulings on points of law into a single new structured compendium of Jewish law, as Maimonides, Jacob ben Asher and Joseph Karo had done before him. As we have just seen, the Gaon's sons recorded that he didn't put together such a compendium because it was not the will of God that he do so, and so it may be.

But it is also the case that Eyliohu of Vilna did not in his later years enjoy scholarly tranquility. For all his success in staying aloof from personal, communal and rabbinic conflicts, whether in Vilna or elsewhere, his deepest convictions led him to hurl himself into one of the most bitter conflicts within world Jewry in the last thousand years. That conflict is of course the Hasidic-Misnagdic confrontation of the late eighteenth century.

Hasidism was a dynamic new Jewish movement that arose in the earlier eighteenth century in Podolia, the part of Ukraine south of Volhynia that sits between the Dniester and the southern Bug. Despite the relative proximity (and the sharing of borders, both internal Jewish and national borders), and despite a common Ashkenazic heri-

tage, the histories of the two Jewries were very different. While the Litvaks enjoyed relative peace and tranquility in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania “up north,” both before and after the 1569 Union of Lublin federation with Poland, Ukrainian Jewry suffered a devastating catastrophe in the mid-seventeenth century.

To traditional East European Jews this catastrophe is known as *Gzéryes tákh-v'tát* (“The Evil Decrees of the Years [5]408-[5]409” = 1648-1649). Modern historians call it the Chmielnitski massacres (even if their prime instigator, Bogdan Chmielnitski, continues to be regarded as a great nationalist hero in Ukraine). In brief, Chmielnitski (Chmielnicki, Khmel'nitski etc.) led a peasant and Cossack rebellion against Polish rule of the Ukraine (he later took Ukraine into union with Russia). His hordes sacked hundreds of Jewish communities and murdered many thousands. Historians continue to debate the magnitude of the numbers, but the multiple accounts that have survived all attest to savage brutality, mass murder of entire populations of towns, and the destruction of much of Jewish life in the Ukraine.

A decimated and devastated Ukrainian Jewry, sinking in mass mourning, impoverishment and near hopelessness, was ripe for belief in some sort of imminent redemption by God. The “relief” that came was in the form of a false Messiah from a faraway land, Shabse Tsvi (modern Hebrew Shabbetai Tzvi; in English most frequently Sabbethai Zevi). Born in Smyrna (now Izmir), Turkey in 1626, Shabse Tsvi developed a mass following among Jews in many countries who believed his claims of being the long-awaited Messiah who would redeem his suffering people. In many localities, bitter disputes arose between his supporters and opponents. He claimed to have the right to abrogate Jewish laws and to find purity through sin, and he even found himself a “prophet,” Nathan of Gaza, who played the traditional role of Elijah in heralding the coming of God’s anointed. Kabbalists and soothsayers, and Jewish and Christian millenarians alike, had settled on the year 1666 as the year of redemption. Well, 1666 came, and confronted by a suspicious sultan with the choice of conversion to Islam or death, he chose to save his own skin (becoming Mehmed Efendi in the process), and redeemed nobody. Nevertheless, the Sabbatean sect continued to exert its influence, often in secret. His supporters looked upon the disasters of Ukrainian Jewry as traditional harbingers, or “birthpangs of the Messianic age” upon which much had been written in mainstream kabbalistic literature. One follow-up was a remarkable second false Messiah, Jacob Frank (1726—1791), a native of Podolia who attracted supporters in Poland, Germany and elsewhere.

The seventeenth century destruction of much of Ukrainian Jewry naturally had a crushing effect on Talmudic studies there. Even for those who were not swayed by the Sabbateans, or who were sorely disappointed by the exposure of their savior as a fraud, the culture of mysticism ran deeper and deeper. Forms of “practical Kabbalah” (as opposed to philosophical or “speculative” Kabbalah) arose. Practical Kabbalah purported to perform miracles. In particular a class of everyday wonder workers called *báaley shem* (“masters of the name [of God]”) were thought able to help the sick and hopeless with amulets containing allegedly kabbalistic combinations of various of the sacred and ineffable names of the Almighty. They had existed well before the false Messiah, but they proliferated during an age of messianic fervor.

Into this time and place came a new movement that is today one of the most powerful Jewish religious blocs, and that demographers agree will grow to represent the majority of unassimilated world Jewry in the fullness of time. It is called Hasidism (Yiddish *khsides*, Ashkenazic Hebrew *khasídu*, Israeli *chasidút*). A follower is known as a Hasid, plural Hasidim (Yiddish *khósid*—*khsídim*, Ashkenazic Hebrew *khósid*—*khasídim*, Israeli *chasíd*—*chasidím*) In Yiddish, the spoken language of the traditional Jewish communities in question, the term acquired two meanings. A *khósid* (or *khúsíd* in Ukrainian and Polish Yiddish) can refer to someone who is an actively practicing Hasid. It can also mean more generally a “follower,” especially in intimate, colloquial usage. So and so can have, say, “his *khsídim*”

which can translate into the contemporary sense of “admirers” or “followers.” The older Hebrew meaning was more along the lines of “goodhearted person” from the ancient Semitic root for “kindness” or “generosity of spirit.”

The Hasidic movement, like its like-named antecedent in old Ashkenaz in Germany (see p. 40), was deeply mystical. But, unlike the many ascetic traditions of earlier mystics, it preached joy, happiness and closeness to God via optimism, ecstasy, and feeling high as much of the time as possible. Its founder was Yisroel Baal Shem Tov (Israel, the master of the good name, or, some would have it, the good master of the name). He is also known by his acronym, the *Besht*. He lived from about 1700 to 1760 in Podolia, and is most associated with the village Mezhibuzh. He became known as a wonder-working charismatic who built up a *hojf* (a Hasidic court). Previously, the word *rebbe* (*rébe*), had been (and continues to be) the intimate form of *rov* or *rabbi*, for a traditional teacher, and also the vocative in addressing a *rabbi* in the second person (one begins with “Rebbe!” when addressing a traditional *rabbi* in Yiddish). The new Hasidic movement of the eighteenth century turned it into the specific title of their guru-like charismatic leader. He was (and is) for them *der rébe* (“the Rebbe”).

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“convert” because he was a profound scholar and speculative kabbalist. According to the lore, he had made himself sick with excessive asceticism and sought (and obtained) a cure from the Baal Shem Tov. He gave the new movement a more profound kabbalistic underpinning and organizational structure.

By then hasidism was known for having introduced practices of ecstasy and highness, including fierce and violent movement during long, extended trances of prayer, somersaulting, and what seemed to outsiders to be constant merry-making. There continue to be different views on the use or abuse of alcohol, substance smoking and various forms of sex among the first generation of the new sect. As happens in history, the radicals of yesterday were to become the perceived ultra-conservatives of a later age.

Dov-Ber of Mezritsh who tolerated or supported much of these popular practices was also a profound scholar who introduced a number of theological innovations. An expert on serious Kabbalah, he was at home with the works of the celebrated sixteenth century mystics of Safad in the Galilee. He discarded the accepted Ashkenazic prayerbook and replaced it with the one compiled by the great mystic, the Ari (Isaac Luria, 1534—1572). To moderns the differences may seem very minor but within a culture where every received word is holy, this was explosive. In a more philosophical bent, Dov-Ber, influenced by another Safad mystic, Moses Cordovero (1522—1570), introduced a kind of pantheism, the component that claims that God is present in

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everything, and everything is part of God. The popular and the metaphysical were fused in the concept of *devekuth* (Yiddish *dvéykes*, Ashkenazic *dvéykus*, Israeli *devekút*). From an ancient Semitic root for “cleave to” it came to refer to the state of elevated spirituality of a certain kind of ecstasy, by which every human being can come into intimate contact with the part of God that is to be found everywhere, even in the most mundane things encountered in daily life.

Another major personality in the early days of the Hasidic movement was Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye. His main work, which appeared in 1780, evolved the concept of the *tsádik* (literally “righteous person” or “saint,” plural *tsadíkim*) as a kind of technical term referring to a higher souled individual whom simple people need for communication with God and spiritual needs. In popular usage, *tsádik* became a synonym to *rebbe*.

Rebbs and *tsadíkim* proliferated. The movement spread with extraordinary rapidity throughout Ukraine, Poland, and Galicia. Many of the rebbs of that period became founders of dynasties. The name of each dynasty came from the village, town or city. Among the most famous are the dynasties of Belz (now in Ukraine), Bratslav (Ukraine), Ger (Góra Kalwaria, Poland), Satmar (Szatmárnémeti in Hungarian, now Satu-Mare, Rumania), Tshernobl (Chernobyl, Ukraine, yes the same one . . .), Vizhnitz (Vizhnitsa or Vijnita, Ukraine). There are many more. In Hasidic areas such as Brooklyn’s Boro Park, one can see on numerous buildings the Jewish names of East European towns, many of them now small and un-

known dots on maps. Just as in the history of Lithuanian Jewry, the Jewish cultural space does not always match any current political configuration. Within East European Jewish cultural history, Satmar is in Hungary, Belz is in Galicia, and so forth.

The powers of the rebbe (or *tsádik*) were believed to be passed on genetically. As a result hasidism became largely dynastic. Many of today’s Hasidic rebbs are direct descendants of the founders of their dynasty. The Yiddish word *hoff* (literally “yard”) came in Hasidic culture to be expanded to the concepts “court” and “dynasty.”

Hasidism developed the art of storytelling in the vernacular Yiddish. Without the modern concepts “language loyalty” or “feminism” being in its vocabulary, needless to say, it nevertheless elevated the status of the native language and of women (and for that matter all of the uneducated-in-Talmud population) by stressing the spiritual capacity of every simple person to attain spirituality in the absence of years of academic study. Analogously, traditional Jewish melodies, songs, dances and other types of folk creativity were elevated in stature and acceptability.

For a survey of late twentieth century research on Hasidism, the reader is referred to Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert’s anthology of papers by the top scholars in the field, *Hasidism Reappraised* (London, 1997), and to Gershon Hundert’s *Essential Papers on Hasidism* (New York, 1991).



It does not require much imagination to visualize how Eylohu the Gaon of Vilna — or Lithuanian Jewish scholars more generally — would react to all this.

In everyday life: uninhibited body movements during extended ecstatic prayer, not always within the timeframes prescribed by Jewish law; merrymaking, somersaulting; frequent singing, dancing, drinking, smoking; an emphasis on passion.

In the structure of the community: elevation of individuals to the status of infallible leaders of Jewry on the basis of perceived mystical powers rather than educational and academic achievement in the world of Talmudic study; belief in the transmission of these qualities genetically.

In theology: belief in a form of pantheism.

In religious life: switching of prayerbook texts to a foreign tradition and other innovations (for example, in the details of the knife used for ritual slaughter).

But beyond any roster of details (and this illustrative list could be made rather longer) there were two unforgivable transgressions in the eyes of traditional rabbinic Judaism: first, the relegation of study to a position rather low down on the ladder of Jewish priorities, and second, the multiple perceived changes in Jewish law (from violating the laws setting the specific times of prayer to using finely honed slaughtering knives of smelted steel).

And, lurking in the near and barely subconscious background was the fear that after the still-fresh Sabbatean and Frankist false-messiah move-

ments, here it was all over again, a dangerous messianic movement.

Nevertheless, it is most likely that there would have been no great dispute had Hasidism stayed in its “box,” in other words, its native areas of Ukraine, Poland, Galicia and Hungary, in short, the non-Lithuanian, southern areas of Jewish Eastern Europe.

Serious trouble broke out when Hasidism began to make inroads in Lithuania. Even worse, the ideas and behavior of the Hasidim in Lithuania tended by and large to be closer to that of Lithuanian Jewry than down south, and this made the “threat” that the Hasidim were posing to established authority all the more “dangerous.” It is well known from history that two close traditions can be in much more bitter confrontation than two distant ones, though “closeness” is of course measured by the view of the beholder. To the groups themselves, each “little” difference can have very “big” import.

It was Dov-Ber of Mezritsh who set the heart of a number of his most talented disciples on slaying the great dragon: bringing Hasidism to Lita.

The first serious Hasidic outpost in Lithuania was set up in the early 1760s, not far from Ukraine, in a neighborhood of Pinsk (now Belarus) then known as Karlín. One of Dov-Ber’s followers was Aaron of Karlín. Aaron (“Aaron the Great” to the Hasidim) set up a little prayerhouse there. Although given to frequent fasting himself, and instructing his Hasidim to study the Bible, he was a charismatic builder of a Hasidic court. He was known for preaching that depression is a se-

rious sin, and joy a vital component of true belief. For some time, opponents of Hasidism used the term *Karlíner* for Hasidim generally, or at least for all those in Lithuania.

There were to be others, extending ever deeper into Lithuania.

Chaim-Chaikel (or Chaiké for short) of Amdur started out as a *khazn* (cantor) in Karlín. He became a disciple of Aaron who was himself a disciple of Dov-Ber who was a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov (in an example of the early master-disciple chains responsible for the rapid spread of the movement). In the late 1760s, he began to set up his Hasidic court at Amdur (now Indura, Belarus) just south of the great Lithuanian Jewish center at Grodna. He was a serious religious thinker who propounded the idea that people must neutralize their own will before that of God. For several years up to his death in 1787 he was the one and only Hasidic rebbe in all Lithuania.

The movement reached northeastern Lithuania, when Menachem-Mendel of Vitebsk (1730—1788), another disciple of Dov-Ber's, was driven from Minsk, and relocated to Haradók in the Vitebsk area in 1773. He was a towering figure who synthesized the Hasidic version of God-in-everything with the Lithuanian emphasis on the study of Torah. He took for a major point a statement on the very first page of the central work of Kabbalah, the Zohar, that innovation in the study of Torah goes right up to the cosmos where it creates a new heaven. Moreover, he conceived of the *tsádik* more as a teacher and guide than some kind of miracle worker.

Menachem-Mendel settled in the Land of Israel in 1777, leaving a gap in leadership in a movement that was making huge strides in winning the hearts and minds of much of the Jewish population of eastern Lithuania.

Israel ben Peretz, yet another pupil of Dov-Ber of Mezritsh, settled in Pólotsk (now Polack, Belarus) in 1772, and became known as Israel of Pólotsk (Reb Yisróel Pólotsker). He emigrated to Israel with Menachem-Mendel but returned to his homeland a few years later to raise funds for the Hasidim who had settled in the Holy Land.

In the waning years of the eighteenth century and through the first decade of the nineteenth, Lithuanian Hasidism was left with two very different figures. One of them, Avróm Kólshker (of Kólshik, now Koljuški, Belarus), near Vitebsk, was much closer in his behavior to southern Hasidism than to the newly emerging Lithuanian variety. He was known for his ecstatic somersaults and headstands during prayer, wild parties “to drive away sadness” and vitriolic outbursts against the top scholars of his time who opposed the new movement. He emigrated to Israel with Menachem-Mendel in 1777 but remained in touch all his life through correspondence, emissaries and involvement in fundraising and internecine conflicts. Truth to tell, his behavior attracted much opposition on the part of many leaders of Lithuanian hasidism. Because he and his Hasidim made their appearance in Kólshik in the year 5530 [= 1769-1770], an acronym derived from the Hebrew letters which spell out that year in the Jewish calendar, *tolk*, came to be an appella-

tion for “the crazies” who duly became “the Hasidim of *tolk*.” Kólishker died in 1810. There is linguistic humor in the name insofar as *makhn a tolk* in Yiddish has the sense of “bring in order [something wild or unruly]” and the moderates among the Hasidim saw the need to bring a *tolk* to the “crazies” who were creating the misimpression that all Hasidim were somehow “wild.”

The other figure was quite the opposite. He was a great Talmudic scholar and kabbalist. In fact he was in many ways a quintessential Litvak, a sort of eastern Lithuanian Gaon-of-Vilna type figure.

His scholarly accomplishments include a new version of the *Shálkxon órukh*, of which part was destroyed in fire and part published posthumously. In 1797 he published the first part of the work for which he is most famous, *Likútey amórim* (“Collections of Sayings”), better known from its first word by the name *Tánya* (Aramaic for “we have learned,” a frequent way of starting a discussion in the Talmud, pronounced *tánye* in Yiddish). In the opinion of many, it is the most profound exposition of Hasidic doctrine written by any of the early Hasidic masters.

Shneur-Zalmen’s life was both tragic and triumphant. It is a life that was intricately bound up with the Hasidic-Misnagdic struggle within Lithuanian Jewry.



The path for the Hasidic inroad into Lithuania was enabled in part by the Polish-

Lithuanian Commonwealth decision in 1764 to close down both the Council of the Four Lands as well as the Council of Lithuania. The weakening of central Jewish authority opened more doors for dissent as well as “infiltration.” While the heartland and the west (Zamet) were not susceptible, there were “openings” in the east (Raysn).

As we saw in the biography of the Gaon by his sons in the previous chapter, he had influential pupils in Shklov. They even founded the first known yeshivas in the spirit of the Gaon during his lifetime (see map of Lithuanian yeshivas, p. 147). In 1771 the rabbinic authorities of Shklov cracked down on the new sectarians, and the seized documents were sent to the Gaon in Vilna for examination. The Gaon agreed with the Shklov authorities and pronounced these documents the work of heretics.

At the same time, roughly, trouble broke out in Vilna itself. A circle of followers of Menachem-Mendel of Vitebsk had established a *kloyz* or little prayerhouse in the bastion of Lithuanian Jewry, the city of the Gaon at the time of the height of his powers.

An epidemic killed several hundred children in the winter of 1771-1772, and some interpreted it as having to do with the sins of the new sect which sought to abrogate honored traditions.

They succeeded in attracting two prominent Vilna Jews to the circle, one called Isser, and another who was a popular *mágid* or preacher, called Chaim. Both were accused of slandering the Gaon. The Gaon forgave them that, but ruled their other transgressions against Jewish law unforgivable.

An investigation into the *kloyz* found that prayers were accompanied by wild shouts of obscenities in Yiddish, and by *kályen zikh*, a Yiddish term for a kind of somersault and headstand. One admitted to having been unclean because of a certain sexual sin, and reported that he “obtained absolution” from a certain Menachem-Mendel, who resided in Minsk at the time. This was of course the “ringleader” of Lithuanian hasidism at the time, now known as Menachem-Mendel of Vitebsk.

When it all came to Eyliohu, he ruled “quick and sharp” on a number of actions, including the public burning in Vilna of the heretical writings found and the use of the strongest weapon in the rabbinic arsenal, the *khéyrem* (*herem*) or Ban of Excommunication. Lithuanian Jewish leadership continued to think in terms of the Council of Lithuania. Official letters were sent right after Passover in the Spring of 1772 from Vilna to the other “principal communities of Lithuania” — Brisk, Grodna, Pinsk and Slutsk, with additional missives to Minsk and Shklov, pointing out that in Minsk there resided “the seat of the image of obsession, which provoketh to obsession” (the phrasing coming from Ezekiel 8: 3). Meantime, the Vilna rabbinical authorities meted out strong punishment to the locals, Chaim and Isser. Chaim was forced to leave town in disgrace, and Isser was incarcerated briefly in the city’s famed Castle.

Far from being satisfied, the Gaon, who felt one hundred percent certain he was being faced with one of the major heresies in Jewish history that could bring down Judaism forever,

saw his mission as one of biblical proportions. He remarked (and it is hard to know now in what spirit exactly) that he would have dealt with the sect (the rabbis were by now calling them the *kat*, a derogatory term for “sect”) as the other Elijah, the biblical prophet, dealt with the prophets of the idol Baal (“And Elijah said unto them: ‘Catch the prophets of Baal, let not one of them escape’” — I Kings 18: 40). Further missives went out the following month.

Around that time, the opponents of the Hasidim were becoming known as the *Misnagdím*, a playful coinage in the tradition of Yiddish linguistic creativity using ancient Hebrew roots with some innovative morphology. One of the senses of *ksidím* (Hasidim), as noted above, is “followers” or “adherents.” The new term was coined from the Hebrew root for “opponents” or “protesters.” In fact, the term *Misnagdím* (spelled variously in academic works in English, often *mithnaggedim*; *mitnagdím* in Israeli Hebrew) can quite literally be rendered as “protestants” though the analogy with the sixteenth century Lutheran schism is reversed. It is the *Misnagdím*, who protest the innovation of Hasidism and are in effect the “conservative Catholics” in the analogy, while the “followers” are the radical innovators.

While the term *Litvak* continued to refer to any Lithuanian Jew, it developed a second meaning in the context of the new dispute. For militant Hasidim, it became a near synonym to *Misnaged*. Occasionally, the pronunciation was twisted from *Litvak* to *Litvák* to give the derogatory stressed -ák ending. For their part, the Misnagdím twisted the

word *khsidim* too, to *skhidim* (with the initial consonants metathesized to produce the effect of ridicule). And, some of the Vilna epistles against the Hasidim call them *kh(a)shúdim* “suspects” (which in the southern, non-Lithuanian dialects of Yiddish is rendered *kh(a)shidim*, itself homophonous with some Lithuanian Yiddish pronunciations of *khsidim* because of the merging of *s* and *sh* sounds).

European history mixed in too, as it were. The first Partition of Poland-Lithuania came about in 1772. As a result, the major stronghold of the Hasidim in Lithuania, its far eastern sector centered in the Vitebsk and Mohilev areas, were incorporated into czarist Russia, while the rest remained in the surviving Grand Duchy of Lithuania component of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The central region including Minsk was transferred to Russia in 1793, and the Vilna region followed in 1795 (see p. 130). There appeared to be a Jewish correlate of this first-ever political-military split within what had been united Lita from its inception. During a quarter century when the Hasidic-Misnagdic dispute raged, the camps were largely divided between two countries. In practical terms, this meant that much of the authority that had previously been available to the autonomous centralized Jewish authorities, was rather abruptly lost. This too added to a sense of crisis for the rabbinic authorities who feared that a new movement of wild abandon was about to trample the eastern regions of Lita unchallenged.

Nevertheless, the authority of the Gaon and all the great rabbinic luminaries of Lithuania who

lined up behind him struck a sense of despair into the Hasidic leadership, especially its more moderate Lithuanian elements. At an emergency meeting in Ukraine, in the summer of 1772, a panicked Dov-Ber, the magid of Mezritsh, in the last year of his life, was reported to have rounded harshly on Avrom Kolishker for his and his followers’ outrageous behavior which the others blamed for the calamity of the *khéyrem* issued by the greatest Jewish scholar of that and many other ages.

And here is the rub. The Vilna excommunication had the immediate effect of causing the Lithuanian Hasidim themselves to work hard and bravely to purge their movement of all the extremism which led to the ban in the first place. For a time, the Hasidim, their strength constantly growing on the ground in the Jewish communities of Raysn (eastern Lita), were gripped by fears of an existential threat. Their movement might be doomed in Lita and even Raysn, if the leading scholars of the age were to continue with bans and other measures. To make matters worse for the Hasidim, the Misnagdim organized publication of a compilation of all the bans, letters and circulars signed by the top scholars of the day, including of course, the Gaon of Vilna. The Hasidim organized burnings of this book, and it wasn’t long before some zealous individuals in both camps took to “informing” on each other to government authorities.

One of the few neutral Jewish observers (“negatively disposed to both sides” might be a better description) within Lithuanian Jewry was the Litvak turned German philosopher Solomon



Maimon (see pp. 219-220), who recorded the following in his autobiography:

“Those of the first sect [the Misnagdim] drive themselves to penitence to an extraordinary measure. Instead of just controlling their desires and passions by rules of moderation, they seek to obliterate them; and instead of attempting to seek out the principle of their deeds in pure reason like the Stoics, they look for it in religion. [...] The ideas of the second sect [the Hasidim] are better grounded as far as religion and morals may be concerned, but [...] they fall into every type of excess. [...] They are vain enough to consider themselves organs of the Godhead [...] The result is, that [...] they commit the greatest extremes. Every bizarre proposition is a divine inspiration for them, and every human impulse a call from God. But still [the two sects] went so far as to condemn each other as heretics and they proceeded to persecute each other.”

Some time before 1777, Menachem-Mendel of Vitebsk and Shneur-Zalmen traveled to Vilna to try to meet with the Gaon and prove to him that the Hasidic movement was not at all what he had been led to think. The only version that has come down is from a memoir written some two decades later by Shneur-Zalmen. He recalled that the Gaon closed the door in their faces twice, and finally, when others encouraged him to debate with the emissaries, he left town altogether, returning only when they had left.

With Menachem-Mendel's departure to Israel in 1777, things seemed to be calming down, in Lithuania at least. Another 1772 ban on the Hasidim had been issued by the rabbis of Brod (Brody), Galicia, leading to a severe dispute there.

But then came the book by Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, published in Korets in 1780, which contained bitter criticism of the established rabbinate, adding a major social dimension to the Hasidic movement's explicit philosophy. It was evident that the Hasidim were challenging the long established Jewish order in ways more profound than even the Misnagdim had theretofore thought possible. Jacob Joseph's theology, expressed more explicitly in a second work, divided Jews into a “head” (the *tsadik*) and a “body” (the vast majority of people). Everybody must believe in the *tsadik* and his remedies, and this exalted figure even has the occasional need to “descend” from his pedestal and commit a sin here and there.

It was one thing for somersaulting and cursing during prayer by a small sect to be put in its place. But here, much of the philosophy of the new sect was being published in a rabbinic style work set out in the form of a Torah commentary, that was supporting the rise of absolute authority of a supernatural class of people who need not even be proper Torah scholars. Masses of Jews were nevertheless accepting the new movement down south, as were considerable numbers in the eastern provinces of Lithuania. In one passage, Jews are warned not to follow the words of the Torah scholars! There are quotations from the sayings of the Baal Shem Tov in a spirit of citing the greatest words of wisdom ever uttered. Moreover, the book claims that alien, sinful thoughts that enter the mind “uninvited” during prayer also have their kabbalistic role to play in the divine plan of things. In the place of the erstwhile Hasidic

writings circulating in samizdat copies among small circles of heretics afraid of being caught, rabbinic-style books were now openly being published.

This was all too much for the leading rabbinic scholars of Lithuania. It is not difficult to understand how the Gaon and the community of Lithuanian Torah scholars felt. They were in a war for the survival of the Jewish people “as we know it,” a peaceful, restrained people, living for millennia by the laws of the Torah, led by self-restrained scholars, given to study and love of learning, who were now being tempted by charlatans who were gaining wealth and power over the masses (Jacob Joseph and others made clear in their time that the *tsadik* must be financially supported). The fear was that they would turn Jewry into a wild tribe that would forget its heritage. The Misnagdim were in no mood to take into account that the book was written in part as a polemic reply to the devastating texts of the bans, and that the “worst” passages were being quoted out of context. They were also not interested in appreciating the contrast between this more radical brand of theoretical Hasidism and the Torah-loving, scholarly, restrained, Lithuanian-style Hasidism being developed by the rising star of the east, Shneur-Zalmen of Lyozna, near Vitebsk.

The stage was set for a new *kheyrem*. At Sabbath morning prayers, on the 20th of Av 5541 (= the 11th of August 1781), in *di greyse shul* (the Great Synagogue of Vilna), the text of the ban was read out before the congregation. It is a bilingual document. After a few words of Yiddish, it goes into Hebrew for the bulk of the ban, which recites

the evil of the sect and the details of the ban, which include a prohibition on travel to places where the sect is prevalent. When the ban’s provisions come to what is being proclaimed for Vilna itself, it switches into Yiddish, so that everybody will understand every word. Householders are warned: “in our community or in Shnipeshok or Antókole, not to rent them [...] accommodation” (the reference being to the districts now known as Šnipiškės and Antakalnis in Vilnius).

This ban was signed by the sexton Eliezer. Three days later, the authority of the Gaon was invoked in a further document written in a much more literary Hebrew with many Biblical passages interwoven. And a week after that, at the great fair at Zelva (in Grodna province), which became a favorite meeting place for leading rabbis after the formal demise of the Council of Lithuania, further excommunication bans were issued by the leading rabbis of Grodna and Pinsk. The one for Grodna contains a prohibition on even visiting the nearby town Amdur (Indura), where Chaim-Chaike was running his Hasidic court. The dispute dragged on and on, and there were more and more edicts, including those of Vilna in 1784 and Shklov in 1786. One of the most beloved of Hasidic leaders, Lcyvi-Yitskhok of Berdichev (± 1740—1810), a native of Galicia, had been chosen rabbi of Pinsk in 1775, but was eventually deposed by the local Misnagdim. He moved to Berdichev in Ukraine in 1785, where he lived out his years.

Within Lita, the battleground was eastern Lithuania or Raysn. The western border of Raysn

is a very fluid concept, usually placed somewhere between Vilna and Minsk (but sometimes east of Minsk). Its eastern border is the natural eastern far reach of Lithuanian Jewry, conceptually running from north to south from a point somewhere between Vitebsk and Smolensk. In the east of Raysn, the court of Shneur-Zalmen was becoming supreme as the eighteenth century wore on. The “leader by post,” Menachem-Mendel of Vitebsk, who had emigrated to the Land of Israel in 1777, died in 1787, leaving Shneur-Zalmen in control. It was not to be an easy ride. In addition to some bitter internal power struggles among the Hasidim of the region, and the bitter opposition from the top Lithuanian scholars in the great cities still under Polish-Lithuanian rule, there were reorganized central Jewish communities in his region, which Russia took over in 1772 in the First Partition of Poland, where the leadership was still staunchly Misnagdic.

Around 1784, Shneur-Zalmen was summoned to appear before the central Jewish community authorities in Mohilev, and warned that he would be brought by force if he failed to comply. Instead of turning up, he sent a remarkable written statement, which stands as a major turning point in the history of Hasidism. The time for radical innovation was over, and the time for proving that Hasidism was entirely within mainstream Judaism had come. On the narrower issue of the day, he demonstrated that the summons was not issued in accordance with Jewish law which would guarantee him the right to speak for himself before any decision was made, noting with

regret the anti-Hasidic decisions of the Jewish authorities in Shklov and Mohilev, and noting also the extent of the material and moral damage that had been done to the Hasidic communities by the organized leadership in the course of their campaign. He explains that the many accusations are false, and that his people do strictly adhere to the precepts of the Torah and rabbinic law. The document acknowledges that the Gaon of Vilna is the greatest scholar of the generation, but claims that the will of the many followers of Dov-Ber of Mezritsh is a counterweight to the views of even one superior individual. He proposes an amicable conference with the top scholars of Mohilev and Polotsk (later Vitebsk) provinces to enable him to explain to everyone’s satisfaction all the passages that had caused offense in Hasidic books. In between the lines of the document there runs an argument that bygones are bygones, the Hasidism of eastern Lithuania (Raysn) is a wholesome, traditional and solid brand of Judaism from which nothing is to be feared.

For a time, members of the two groups would not intermarry, avoided doing business with each other and set up separate prayerhouses. In towns where the existing prayerhouses turned Hasidic, the Misnagdim set up a new one. In others, the Hasidim established new prayerhouses. Most often, the several prayerhouses of a shtetl would each go one way or the other. The conflict continued, especially in larger cities where Misnagdim were still powerful. A number of the Hasidic outposts further west, in central Lita, began to fall (including Amdur, after the death of

its charismatic rebbe in 1787). In 1794, the Minsk community closed down the Hasidic prayerhouse there. It seemed that eastern Lithuanian Jewry might be headed down the road of a permanent schism.

Alas, untoward means were used by both sides in the conflict, including not infrequent *mesires* (betrayals, or instances of informing to the czarist authorities in the hope of getting one's enemies in trouble). Each side accused the other of disloyalty to the government, and the Misnagdim, being the bearers of the status quo and the old guard had the edge at times. At the level of the town rabbi, the side not in power would do its best to depose its foe.

The Gaon of Vilna during many of these years resumed his own scholarly work and succeeded in remaining aloof at least as far as public pronouncements are concerned. He had already contributed the strongest weapon in the traditional Jewish arsenal, the *kheyrem* or ban of excommunication, and there was not a whole lot more that he could do. He had moreover grown old and frail, and was determined to avoid spending time and energy on matters other than Torah scholarship. His adamancy had not waned and he would briefly reenter the fray in response to a major provocation. This happened in 1793 when the Hasidim published a major work of the Baal Shem Tov's ideas. The Gaon ordered it burned on Jewish Street in Vilna (the surviving portion is now *Žydų gatvė* in Vilnius, see p. 114).

But then, after another period of silence, the "dirty tricks department" used the Gaon's extended absence from the debate to spread rumors

far and wide that he had recanted his earlier opposition to the Hasidim. In 1796 a man falsely claiming to be the Gaon's son (accompanied by an assistant who announced him as such), traveled through Poland and Germany telling people that his father was brokenhearted with remorse over the harm he had done to the Hasidim. The bluffer was exposed in Breslau when a leading member of the Vilna community, asked about all these things, reported that the Gaon's sons are in Vilna, that he was more adamant than ever and that the traveler was a charlatan. The imposter was caught in Hamburg and the "Vilna vs. the Hasidim" conflict was ignited anew.

In the autumn of 1797, Eylohu the Gaon of Vilna died.

When a number of Hasidim in Vilna and elsewhere celebrated boisterously at the demise of their foe, the Gaon's brokenhearted followers vowed vengeance. Shneur-Zalmen was one of twenty-two Hasidic leaders denounced to the authorities as agitators and heretics. Czarist police arrested him at home in Lyozna at the end of 1797 and took him in chains to St. Petersburg. His statement to the commission of investigation was remarkably impressive, and convinced the authorities that Hasidism posed no danger to the government. Moreover, powerful Hasidim had made representations to the government on his behalf. Czar Paul I ordered him released in December 1798. Two years later he was again denounced and arrested, but released promptly when Alexander I came to the throne in 1801.

Twice imprisoned because of trumped up denunciations, Shneur-Zalmen's stature became

greater than ever. For reasons unknown, he moved his court from his native Lyozna to the tiny village Lyadi. Shneur-Zalmen of Lyozna (the town near Vitebsk where, incidentally, Chagall was to be born, now Lyozna, Belarus) was to remain known as Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi (Lyadi is now in Belarus, smack on the Russian border).

He traveled to various communities both to minister to his Hasidim and to meet with Misnagdic rabbis and prove to them that there was really, "after all that" nothing much to be upset about. In his final years at Lyadi he suffered more from intra-Hasidic intrigues than from Misnagdim. The conflict was, despite occasional flare-ups, settling down to a gentlemanly difference of tradition. Moreover the geographic distribution was in part complementary. Western and central Lithuania were Misnagdic. The far east was largely Hasidic in the sense of Shneur-Zalmen's moderate, enlightened Hasidism, and an intermediate area was home to both kinds of Lithuanian Jews.

Alas, Shneur-Zalmen was not to end his life peacefully. From the day Alexander I freed him from prison, his loyalty to the Russians was staunch. When Napoleon's armies invaded Belorussia in 1812 the old Hasidic master did everything he could to help the Russians. He wrote to a friend: "If Bonaparte wins, the wealth of the Jews will multiply and their status be raised, but they will be separated and distanced in their hearts from their Father in Heaven; and if our lord Alexander wins, though poverty will multiply among the Jews, and their status will be lower, but they will be bound and

... tied in their hearts to their Father in heaven. [...] And for God's sake, throw this letter right into the fire!"

It was no secret that Shneur-Zalmen was encouraging his people to help the Russians. In some cases it was alleged, his followers reported French troop movements to Russian army officers (in other words, spying). When Napoleon's army was nearing Lyozna, he was advised to flee with his family deep into Russia. That was in August of 1812. For five months, the sick old rabbinic master and his closest relatives fled from town to town. One of the most powerful biographical documents in Hasidic literature is the memoir by his son and successor Dov-Ber about his last and very sad days on the road. The need to flee further and further was so strong that the holy man permitted the wagons to continue their journey on the Sabbath (allowed by Jewish law when life is at stake). But his health gave way to the freezing Russian winter. He died in January 1813 in a village near Kursk and was taken to be buried at the Jewish cemetery in Haditsh in the district of Poltava.



In spite of his difficult life, Shneur-Zalmen succeeded in creating a new branch of Lithuanian Jewish culture that fused the Lithuanian passion for learning with a moderated form of Hasidic life and lore. To skeptics from both sides he proved that there was no necessary incompatibility between Torah study and observance of *all* the commandments on the one hand with *all* the

basic tenets of Hasidism (among them the imported version of the Ari's prayerbook; the Hasidic version of pantheism; the figure of the *tsádik*).

His brilliance is evident even from the name he gave his new "compromising" movement, the more so in a culture where names and their sources and popular acronyms play such a huge role. It is taken from the depths of kabbalistic mysticism *and* reflects (at least at the literal level of interpretation) precisely those values of Lithuanian Jewry which the Misnagdim feared were being thrown overboard.

One of the classic works of the Kabbalah is the *Sefer Yetzirah* ("Book of Creation"). Some scholars date the work as late as the eighth century AD, some as early as the third or fourth. One of its best known sections names the ten *sefiroth* (Yiddish *sfires*, Ashkenazic *sefiroyts*, Israeli *sefirót*). They are emanations from the Infinite that manifest divine attributes, and can be thought of as intermediate qualities between the Infinite and the empirical world. A huge literature arose over the *sefiroth* and their nature. Many kabbalistic books contain diagrams seeking to discover mystical interrelationships between the *sefiroth*, their ordering, and various aspects of God. The most common listing of the ten gives:

Késer (Crown)
 Khókhmo (Wisdom)
 Bino (Understanding) with its subcategory
 Dáas (Knowledge)
 Khésed (Love [or: Kindness])

Gvúro (Strength)
 Tiféres (Beauty)
 Nétsakh (Triumph [or: Eternity])
 Hod (Splendor)
 Yésód (Foundation)
 Málkhus (Royalty)

The name of Shneur-Zalmen's movement came from the second, third and fourth words down the line: *Khókhmo*, *Bino* and *Dáas*. The acronym for these three *sefiroth* in kabbalistic parlance, using the traditional rules for acronyms (a vowels and word-final stress for acronyms that end in a consonant), is — *khabád*, popularly spelled *Chabad* (or *Habad*) in English. Whatever the deeper philosophical and mystical points being made, there was a statement here, at the popular level, that *this* branch of Hasidism is "into" wisdom, understanding and knowledge at its core. Put into the context of the late eighteenth century debate raging in Lithuania, this was a polemic statement against the somersaulters and ravers among the Hasidim, and an assurance to scholars of the Gaon's ilk that there is frankly nothing to worry about.

At some point in the history of Chabad Hasidism, its leaders took to referring to the non-Lithuanian (in other words Ukrainian-Polish) Hasidim by the term *khagás*, an acronym for "their" chosen "primary" divine attributes: *khésed*, *gvúro* and *tiféres* — kindness, strength and beauty.

Ironically, the actual text of Shneur-Zalmen's *Tanya*, of which he published one part

in 1797, was in fact the “smoking gun” which his enemies used to get him arrested and charged. His notions of the Jewish soul being “higher” than that of the gentile did not look very good in translation to non-Jewish readers, and remains deeply disturbing to many Jewish readers today, though the entire spirit of the book is kabbalistic and philosophical. It is addressed in large part to the *béyneni* (*béynoyni*, *benoni*) or “average person” whose soul the author further distinguishes from that of the *tsádik*.

Shneur-Zalmen, as mentioned above, had moved himself and his court from his native Lyozna across the Dnieper to Lyadi to the south, thereby changing forever his name in the annals of Jewish culture from “Shneur-Zalmen of Lyozna” to “Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi.” Still, he is

best known to this day to his own Hasidim, lovingly, as *der alter rébe*, “the old Rebbe.” His son Dov-Ber moved the dynasty to a third town more or less half way between the other two, Lubávitsh (in local Yiddish pronunciation, *Libávitsh*, now Lyubavičy, in Russia). That was the name that stuck. Shneur-Zalmen’s movement became the Chabad-Lubavitch movement that is so active and well-known today.

There are still small groups of Lithuanian Hasidim associated with other towns (most notably Karlin-Stolin and Slonim), but the other early centers have all disappeared as namesakes of Hasidic groups. They once included Amdúr (now Indura), Kobrin, Kóydenov (now Džiarzinsk), Lékhevitsh (Lechevičy) and more. All these places are now in Belarus.

Faces of the opponents and their books. . .

Eylohu, the Gaon of Vilna, who lived from 1720 to 1797, took Talmudic research to new intellectual heights. Vilna and Lithuania came to symbolize a society in which learning was prized above all else. The role model was the determined scholar who avoided emotionalism as well as the distractions of everyday concerns.

During the same period, the Hasidic movement, founded by Israel Baal Shem-Tov (1700 — 1760) arose in Podolia, Ukraine, stressing altogether different ideals: joy; ecstatic prayer; mystical communication with God; and belief in the supernatural powers of a charismatic *rebbe*, whose mantle was usually passed on dynastically.

The movement of the Hasidim (or *Chasidim*, plural of *chosid* which means “pious person”) spread with breathtaking speed through the southern regions of Jewish Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Galicia, Poland, Hungary), but ran into adamant opposition among Lithuanian Jews — the Litvaks — who became known as *Misnagdim* (literally “opponents” or “protestants”).

The dispute was “at a distance” until groups of Hasidim emerged in Lithuania itself in the late eighteenth century. It was the internal conflict between these two groups of Litvaks — the traditionalist Misnagdim and the “special Hasidim of Lithuania” — which resulted in most of the “Hasidic-Misnagdic war.”

In 1772, the Gaon of Vilna, along with other leading Lithuanian rabbinic authorities, issued their first famous *kheyrem* or ban of excommunication against the Hasidim. A bitter dispute ensued.

One major result was the crystalization and systematization of a new Third Way founded by Shneur-Zalmen of Lyozna (a village near Vitebsk). Born in 1745, he studied with Ukrainian Hasidic masters down south, came back up north, and became the preeminent leader of the Lithuanian Hasidim. He devised a compromise ideology that incorporated major Hasidic concepts while accepting the traditional Lithuanian emphasis on learning. To emphasize how different his movement was, it was called *Chabad* (often spelled Habad), an acronym for the words for “wisdom,” “understanding,” and “knowledge.” He moved to nearby Lyadi in his later years. After his death in 1813, his son, the second rebbe of the dynasty, moved to a third nearby town, Lubavitch, from which the movement took its name. The “Lubavitch movement” is a dynamic force in modern Judaism internationally.

As fate would have it, the only “images taken from life” of the great leaders of these two branches of Lithuanian Jewry were drawn by Christians. Portrait drawing was not a traditional Jewish pastime in the eighteenth century.

The late Gaon scholar Zusia Efron of Jerusalem discovered the history of this portrait of the Gaon of Vilna (not nearly as famous as the later artists’ renditions which were widely reproduced, see p. 111). It was drawn out of curiosity by a young Polish artist who was a student at the University of Vilna. It was a pencil drawing that later formed the basis of an oil painting. In 1923, the Gaon’s family donated it to the An-sky Museum in Vilna (then Wilno, Poland), where it was kept until the Second World War.

Shneur-Zalmen’s portrait was made during his imprisonment by czarist authorities in St. Petersburg in 1798, at the instruction of one of the curious prosecuting officials. The charges against him were trumped up by his enemies, and he was duly released.

Drawn from life:

Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi



Drawn from life: The Gaon

Vilnius Yiddish Institute



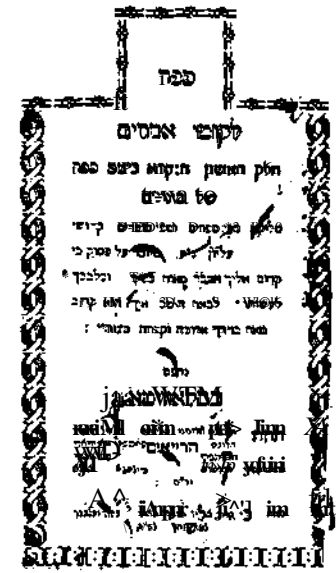
Rabbi Avremi Kievman / Lubavitch of Liverpool

Shneur-Zalmen's major Hasidic work was the *Tanya* (or *Likútey amórim*, "Collections of Sayings"). He published the first part anonymously, in 1796. The full version appeared in 1814, after the author's death. It represents the philosophical component of Chabad Hasidism.

The philosophical reply from the Misnagdim came from the pen of the Gaon of Vilna's best known pupil, Chaim of Valozhin (1749—1821). Chaim's *Nefesh ha-Chaim* ("The Soul of Life" and also a play on the author's name) first appeared in Vilna in 1824.

The *Tanya* argues that the *rebbe*, or *tsádik* ("righteous one") is born with a higher soul than the average person, and offers a version of Hasidic philosophy which finds God in everything that is manifest in the world. Chaim of Valozhin's reply insists on the distinction of creator and created, and elevates Torah scholarship to a high mystical level, higher than all the ecstatic prayer in the world.

The two groups made peace in the early nineteenth century (while keeping their distinctive identities within Lithuanian Jewry), in the face of new mutual challenges: assimilatory and christianizing policies of the czarist government, and the attempts at reform by the modernizing Haskalah movement.



Rabbi Avrami Rivlin / Lubavitch of Liverpool

Shneur-Zalmen's classic work of Chabad Hasidism which came to be known as the *Luvai*



Beit Yehonatan Library

Chaim of Valozhin's classic: *Nefesh ha-Chaim*, the Misnagdic reply to the *Luvai*

Beginnings of Jewish printing in Lithuania

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The academic prestige of Vilna and Lithuania had spread far and wide in the Jewish world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But it wasn't until the 1780s that Hebrew printing was first seriously established in Lithuania. Beforehand, the works of Lithuanian Jewish scholars were printed in the old European Jewish publishing centers in Amsterdam, Prague and various cities in Germany, and also in the Ukraine and Poland.

It seems that the first Jewish books appeared simultaneously in the west, in Grodna, and in the east, in Shklov, in the year 1788. It also seems that Misnagdim — the Litvak opposition to the nascent and rapidly spreading Hasidic movement — played a key role in Lithuania's establishing her own Jewish printing centers. Those in the south had, not unexpectedly, become outlets for Hasidism, and for legitimizing Hasidism by producing classic and standard alongside Hasidic works. This is one of many ways in which the raging dispute energized both sides to many accomplishments.

Thought to be the one of the first Jewish books published in Lithuania, the *Zera Yákev* (*Zera Yaakov*) is a commentary on the Book of Psalms. Its author, Jacob of Vistinits, near Grodna, named the book (whose title translates “Seed of Jacob” after Psalms 22: 24) for his great grandfather, Jacob. Grodna in 1788 was still part of what was left of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (to be incorporated into Russia just seven years later with the third partition of Poland-Lithuania). It is symbolically notable that this first Jewish book published in Lita was printed in the official printing house of “the wisest among kings, Stanislavus Agustus, king of Poland and grand duke of Lithuania.” The reference is to Stanislaw II August Poniatowski.



One of the first Jewish books published in Lithuania: a commentary on the Book of Psalms (Grodna 1788)



Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

The *Sháar ho-rákhaim* (“Gate of Mercy”), a prayerbook with commentaries, compiled by Pinkhes (Phinchas) of Polotsk, a leader and preacher in the Misnagdic movement, an ardent follower of the Gaon of Vilna and an energetic campaigner against Hasidism. It was apparently published to counter the changes in the liturgy being introduced by the Hasidim during this period.

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A Misnagdic prayerbook in the spirit of the Gaon of Vilna (Shklov 1788)

Considered to be the first Jewish book printed in Vilna, this work too was issued by Pinkhes of Polotsk. It is a version, abridged by him, of *Éven bóykhan* (*Even bochan*), a satire on religious abuses attributed to the twelfth and thirteenth century scholar Kalonymus ben Kalonymus of Provence. This version appeared in Vilna in 1799, two years after the death of the Gaon, when the Hasidic-Misnagdic conflict had flared up anew. It is thought to be intended as a parable on alleged Hasidic abuses of Jewish religion.

This edited re-issue of a medieval satire that exposes religious abuses appeared in Vilna in 1799. It is the first Jewish book known to have been published in the city. In earlier times, Vilna scholars had their works published abroad.



Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

A Land for Jewish Tradition

In terms of East European Jewish culture, ethnography and dialectology, the Lithuanian vs. mainstream Hasidic schism is a north-south affair. The Litvaks (including the Litvak-like Chabad Hasidim) occupy the north (traditional Lita) and the Hasidim Ukraine and Poland in the south. This division mirrors those of Yiddish cultural folklore studies, though theologically and religiously, Chabad is of course a component of Hasidism generally. Within Lithuanian Jewry itself, the fault-line came to divide the Misnagdic west from the Hasidic east, with an area of coexistence in between.

Bearing in mind, first, that the bitter schism within Lithuanian Jewry raged for decades and included excommunications, denunciations and periods of imprisonment; and second, that the two camps were in power for the most part in these different parts of one and the same Lita, it would seem to any a priori historian that the split would head down the path of increasing division, acrimony and ill-feeling.

But that was not to be for a number of reasons.

For one thing, the untamed behavior that elicited so energetic a response in the first place disappeared. The campaign of the Misnagdim, buttressed by the consequent internal Hasidic housecleaning, more or less did away with the wild behavior of the new movement, and led it to become an establishment variety of traditionalist Judaism.

For another, the deep personal animosities of an array of leaders on both sides did not pass on to their children and pupils.

Moreover, the dominance of each group in a different part of Lithuania (albeit with a considerable transitional region coinhabited by both) also reduced opportunities for friction in the great centers of each. It was clear, for example, at a certain point, that the religious leaders of say Grodna, Kovna, and Vilna would be Misnagdic; those of Vitebsk and (eventually) Mohilev and Gomel would be Chabad-Hasidic. And, there would be representatives of both in “border post” or “mixed” cities like Minsk.

Then there was the advent of czarist rule over all the Litvaks from the end of the eighteenth

Cultural Boundaries within Eastern European Jewry

Scale 1: 10,760,000



Dialects of Yiddish

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Northwestern | Northeastern ("Lithuanian") |
| Northern Transitional | Mideastern ("Polish") |
| Midwestern | Southeastern ("Ukrainian") |
| Southwestern | Colonial Yiddish |
| Southern Transitional | |

Major religious centers

- Classical Lithuanian (Mitsnagdic)
- Lithuanian Hasidic
- Classical Hasidic

Architecture areas

- Wooden synagogues:
north of the line usually Yargina's types IV and V
south of the line usually Yargina's types II and III

Food preparation boundaries

- after Herzog (1965)*
- seasoning of Sabbath fish:
 west of the line with sugar
 east of the line without sugar
- preparation of farfel:
 west of the line by cutting
 east of the line by chopping

century onward. This brought a range of painful new problems to be faced over the coming decades, ranging from expulsion of the Jews from the hamlets to the forced conscription of children (see pp. 301-302).

And finally, it wasn't long before a real threat to traditional Jewish religious life from within Judaism came along. That was the Berlin Haskalah and its East European adaptations which advocated abandonment of much of traditional Jewish culture in favor of modernization and varying degrees of assimilation (see pp. 203-204). Almost overnight, the old enemies became sudden allies. By May 1843, the leaders of the Misnagdic and Chabad-Hasidic communities of Lithuania were traveling in one coach to St. Petersburg to defend the status of the old fashioned religious schools in the face of the challenges being posed by the Jewish modernizers who were in cahoots with czarist wishes to assimilate the Jews (see p. 302).

Turning from historic reasoning to culture, there is an overriding case to be made that when all the dust had settled and the personal invective died down, they were all still — Litvaks. They spoke the same dialect of Yiddish that was “still” radically different from the language of the “real” Hasidim in the Ukraine and Poland. They shared a common heritage and a common fate, and the differences in the prayerbook, for instance, simply meant that one now had a choice between two slightly different versions of what is basically the same text. As the Yiddish saying goes, “may nothing worse happen.” Marriages between the

groups became quite normal, and a largely goodnatured folklore of jokes and anecdotes about each arose.

To be sure, the meaning of the word *Litvak* became more complicated. In the larger sense, they were all Litvaks who spoke a *litvishn yidish* (Lithuanian Yiddish). But in a narrower sense, Litvak and its adjective *litvish* came to mean “Misnagdic” in discussions of religious matters or in style of Talmudic scholarship.

When healthy competitiveness replaced the bitterness of invective, the qualities of “Misnagdicness” in the west and “Chabadness” in the east turned out to be a spur to major new enterprises in the realm of traditional religious culture.

In fact, the split into the two camps gave the impetus for the rise of Lithuanian Jewish publishing. While the scholars of Lithuania had been quite happy beforehand to use the prints of the great Jewish publishing houses in Ukraine and Poland, this could no longer be the case when the erstwhile spirit of trust collapsed in the last three decades of the eighteenth century. The key year for the launch of Lithuanian Jewish publishing was 1788. That year, the enterprise seems to have arisen independently in the far west and far east of Jewish Lithuania. In the west, a commentary on Psalms appeared in Grodna, still part of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth (see p. 130). Its publishers later moved on to Vilna and established the fabled Romm publishing house (see p. 187).

In the east, during Shklov's interlude as a major Jewish center (see p. 212), two Misnagdic

books appeared in 1788, both compiled by Pinkhes (Pinchas) of Pólotsk, a leading supporter of the Gaon of Vilna and one of the fashioners of the Misnagdic outlook on life as a system of beliefs and practices, not just as a response to Hasidism. One was his prayerbook with commentaries, *Sháar ho-rákhmin* (*Shaar ha-Rachamin*, “Gateway of Mercy”). The other was his best known work, *Késer Tóyre* (Kether Torah, “Crown of Torah”), in which he elaborates for a wider audience the Gaon’s elevation of Torah study to the highest endeavor in Jewish life, and attacks both Hasidism and Haskalah. In 1799, he published the first Jewish book to appear in Vilna itself (see p. 142). It is an abridged version of a medieval satire against religious abuses. It is not hard to guess whom the intended “analogues” in his own day were meant to be. . . . Pinkhes’s life’s work is the object of a profound work by Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim* (1997).

In the meantime, the publication of Shneur-Zalmen’s works themselves heralded the launch of Hasidic printing in Lita. The first part of *Tanya*, which he published in his lifetime (under the name *Likútey amórim*, “Collections of Sayings”), was printed in Slavuta, Ukraine in 1796, where the Jewish printing press, founded five years earlier, played a major role in the “establishmentization” of Hasidism (by publishing classical as well as Hasidic texts). Soon after Shneur-Zalmen’s death, Hasidic printing was started up in Lithuania too. Its symbolic year of initiation is 1814, when the full edition of the *Tanya*, containing all five parts, was published in Shklov. Later in the nineteenth

century the great publishing house of the Romms in Vilna became the primary publishers of both the Misnagdic and Hasidic editions of the prayerbook. They were also famous for their pan-Lithuanian editions, which were usually labeled *k’minheg Lito, Zamut v’Raysn* (“according to the custom of Lithuania, Zemet and Raysn” – in other words, intended for Misnagdim).



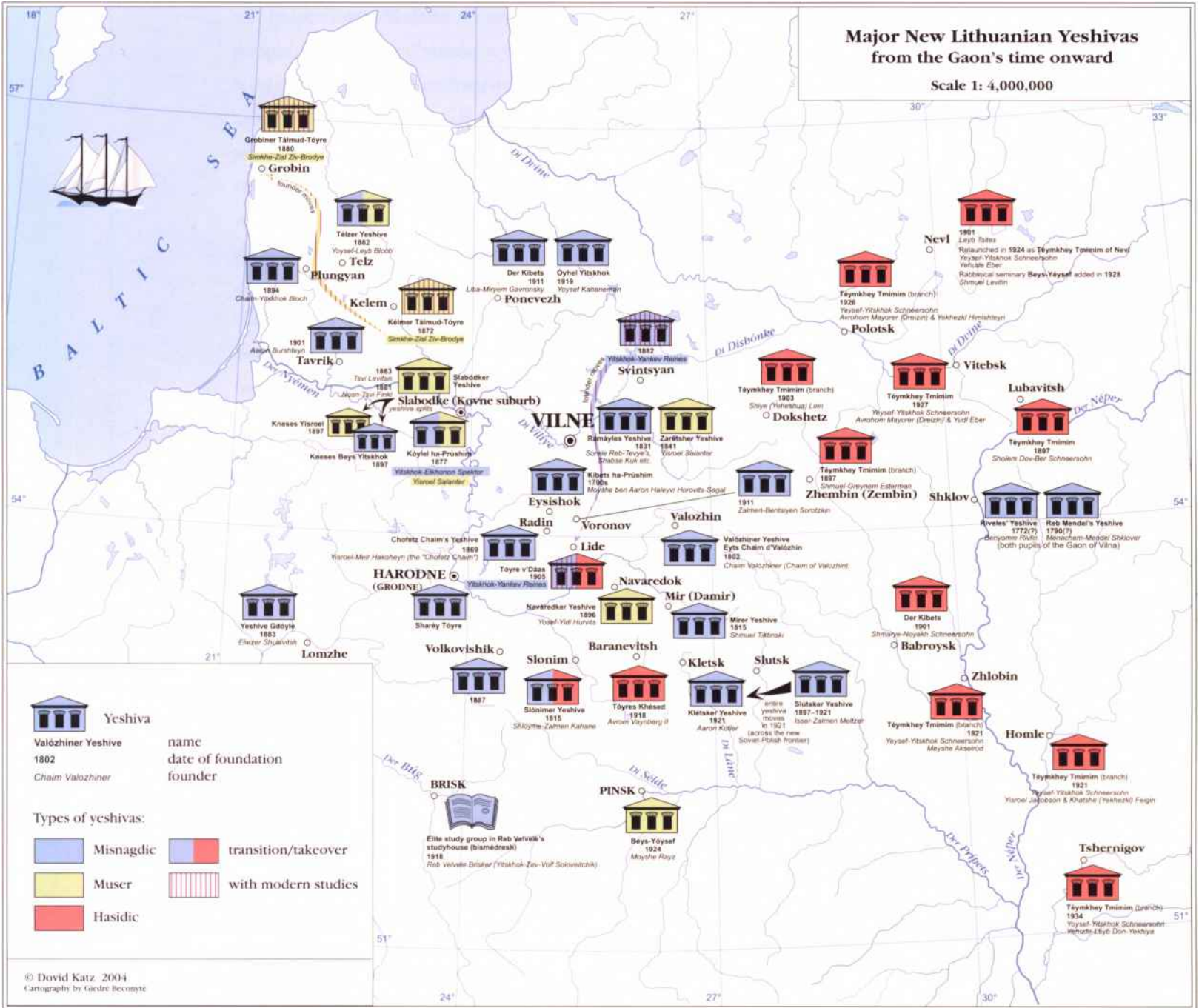
A momentous result of the fracas was the rise of the modern Lithuanian yeshiva. During the Gaon’s lifetime, several of his disciples set up ad-hoc yeshivas in Shklov which had become an outpost in the far east of Lita for several decades. But the Shklov center was not to last (see pp. 212-214).

About five years after the Gaon’s death, in 1802, his pupil Chaim of Valózhin (1749—1821) set up the institution that was to become “the mother of the Lithuanian yeshivas” and of the modern yeshiva generally. During the nineteenth century, the word *Valózhin* (often spelled Volozhin) acquired an aura of sanctity rivaling that of Vilna itself. Many modern visitors to this small and now very rundown town in western Belarus (Valožin) are shocked to find that “this is Valózhin!” It is a prime example of how a non-Jewish place name becomes sanctified in Jewish cultural history.

Chaim had been one of the select pupils which the Gaon chose to sit at his table of learning Torah (see p. 100). His own role in the “Vilna war on Hasidism” was that of the elegant, pensive,

Major New Lithuanian Yeshivas from the Gaon's time onward

Scale 1: 4,000,000



perhaps aristocratic intellectual who lives in the world of ideas, though his acumen led him to success in his clothing manufacturing business too. In his mind, perhaps, when things were looking a little different after the Gaon's death and the second imprisonment of Shneur-Zalmen, the real damage caused by Hasidism was not in any radical departure from the norms of Judaism as feared during the late eighteenth century. It was plain and simple in a downgrading of the primacy of extensive study of Torah in favor of overenthusiastic prayer and other religious elements. Chaim's answer to all this was to establish a modern yeshiva that would be different in principle to previous yeshivas in Ashkenazic history.

To use vocabulary from the university world (and why not, as Chaim was clearly inspired by the structure of non-Jewish institutions of higher education), the new yeshiva was to be set up with strictly adhered to units of time (periods and terms), and it was to have a clear curriculum. That is not to say that it would downgrade the study of Gemora (the major part of the Talmud, that with its commentaries is at the center of the traditional Torah scholar's world). To the contrary, Gemora would remain paramount and its teaching would only be enhanced by good organization, and a clear program in place of ad-hoc hours and haphazard structure of the many small town yeshivas of the day. During a typical term, there was the "requirement" tractate assigned by the yeshiva and the "elective" tractate which the student could choose himself. The required tractates were taught in the traditional cycle. The

typical day included a difficult lecture by the *rosh-yeshiva* (the head of the yeshiva) that would last precisely an hour (on certain occasions an hour and a half). Small groups of students called *khevruises* (an Aramaic term for "friendship" or "scholars of the academy") would spend much more time thereafter dissecting and debating the chunk of text covered in the lecture.

The principal study day ran from nine in the morning to nine at night with an ample midday break. Special groups however either came at sunrise or studied through the night so that the study of Torah would always ring in and around the yeshiva, following in the tradition of the *kloyz* of the Gaon of Vilna.

The yeshiva was housed in a building specially built for the purpose, and did not compete with any space (whether for prayer or study or otherwise) of the townspeople.

In terms of intellectual content and methodology, the Gaon's practices were followed to the hilt: logical analysis of texts with the quest to discover its simple, literal true meaning at the core of the "sense of purpose" of the entire enterprise. This was not to be a stomping ground for practitioners of *pilpul*.

Chaim was determined that its student body be different and treated differently than was usually the case. Yiddish folklore is rich in loving depictions of the practice called *esn teg* which literally means "to eat days," in other words — one day here, one day there. Yeshiva students would be "set up" with families in town who would contribute to the yeshiva's existence by offering a

meal to a certain student on a certain day of the week. Student x would have a routine of eating Sundays at the home of a, Mondays at b's, and so forth. Moreover, each yeshiva student would usually be put up in the home of one of the townspeople.

Reb Chaim put an end (well, at his yeshiva, at least) to the practice and to the image of the *yeshíve-bókker* (the yeshiva student) as some kind of unkempt, perpetually broke ragamuffin always dependent on the charity of the townspeople. He set up a strict system of admissions based on academic skills determined by an oral entrance examination (the *farhér* or "hearing"). An integral part of the new order was a system of scholarships to enable pupils of all economic backgrounds to study at the yeshiva. Locals would be paid rent by the yeshiva for rooms given for the use of the *yeshíve-bókkerim*. The yeshiva's success was in the town's economic interest instead of it being a burden or a cause for constant demands for "charity" by the local *yeshíve-layt* ("yeshiva crowd").

All of these details, taken together, radically transformed the image of the yeshiva from a worthwhile ad-hoc endeavor wholly dependent on local good will and the laws of chance to that of a solid institution with consistent and measurable academic standards.

Many of these ideas were propounded in a document called *Igétes ha-yeshíve* ("Epistle of the Yeshiva"), a call far and wide to the scholars of Lithuania to build the world of Torah by setting up yeshivas on this "proper model." The document made the establishment of new top-notch

academic institutions for Torah study into a central cause for all of (Misnagdic) Lithuanian Jewry, and it was not long before the yeshiva at Valozhin was welcoming Hasidic pupils as well.

Chaim contributed much of the start-up finance himself, and set up a system of (again, to use current terminology) national and international fundraising. *Meshulókhim* ("emissaries") traveled far and wide looking for finance as well as recruiting agents for top teachers and students.

Beyond its dazzling success, Chaim of Valozhin's new institution became the model for yeshivas across the Misnagdic areas of Lithuania. These "*Lítvishe yeshíves*" are marked in blue on the map on page 147, which provides some data on the founder and the year of establishment, as well as some details of their history.

Like countless other rabbinic scholars, Chaim left his major written work to be published after his death. It is a profound philosophical tract that appeared in Vilna in 1824, about three years after his death, under the name *Néfish ha-Cháyim* ("The Soul of Life" or "Soul of the Living" after a midrashic statement "and all the souls, the *soul of the living* and of the dead are given over into your hands" — *Médresh Rábo* 11: 10, on Deuteronomy; it is also a play on words on the author's name and can be read as "The Soul of Chaim").

The book is a kind of statement about the religious basis of Misnagdism and can even be construed as a learned and gentlemanly reply to Shneur-Zalmen's *Tanya*. The *Néfish ha-Chaim* (as Chaim Valózhiner is sometimes called himself, af-

ter his book) claims that the intellectual study of Torah is the highest *religious* endeavor of which a Jew is capable. It also rejects outright the pantheism of Hasidism. There can be no confusion of Creator and Created in his theology.

The earliest attempts to establish yeshivas in the spirit of the Gaon of Vilna were those two set up in Shklov during his lifetime: Riveles' yeshiva around 1772 (the year of the first ban on the Hasidim) and Reb Mendel's yeshiva around 1790. Both played an important but temporary role during the "Shklov interlude" (see p. 212). There are different opinions about the origins of the *Kibets ha-prúshim* ("community of those who distance themselves from their family life to become immersed in study") in Eysishok (now Eišiskės, Lithuania). Some traditions place it as early as the 1790s. The reader is referred to the history of this remarkable shtetl by Yaffa Eliach (*Once there was a World: A 900 Year Chronicle of the Shtetl Eishyshok*, 1998).

But it was the great academy at Valozhin, the first truly professional Lithuanian rabbinical academy that was to become the "Harvard" of the international scene of rabbinic scholarship, and was to pave the way for the others. In the same spirit, leading scholars established academies in a number of towns, including Mir (now in Belarus) in 1815; Slónim (Belarus) in 1815; Kélem (Kelmė, Lithuania) in 1872; Svintsyán (Švenčionys, Lithuania) in 1882; Telz (Telšiai, Lithuania) in 1882; Lómzhe (Łomża, Poland) in 1883; Volkovíshik (Volkovysk, Belarus) in 1887; Plungyán (Plungė, Lithuania) in 1894; Slutsk (Belarus) in

1897; Vóronov (Voronova, Belarus) in 1911; Pónevėzh (Panevėžys, Lithuania) in 1911 and another in 1919; and others. They were all to become world famous names, the virtual "universities" of traditional Lithuanian Jewish culture. During this period, yeshivas on the same model arose in the larger cities too. Among those of particular fame are Reb Mayle's yeshiva (*Ramáyles yeshíve*) in Vilna (1831), and, in 1863 the renowned Slabódke yeshiva of Kovna (Slabólke or Slobodka is now the Vilijampolė district of Kaunas).

There is a rich lore about all of the Lithuanian yeshivas, that leads right into the present. Take for example the yeshiva founded at Slutsk in 1897. When it became clear after World War I that Slutsk would be on the Soviet side of the new Polish-Soviet frontier, its head, or *rosh-yeshíve*, Rabbi Aaron Kotler (1892—1962) proclaimed that the world of Torah scholarship would not survive the new society that the Bolsheviks were forcing upon the population. So, he picked himself up from Slutsk with his whole yeshiva (and a good many townspeople too!), leaving behind all their real estate and much else, and crossed the border over onto the Polish side, more or less stopping at the first shtetl there — Kletsk. And so, the great world center of Torah scholarship led by Rabbi Kotler was, quite literally, "the Slutsk Yeshiva in Kletsk." When the Soviets overran Kletsk in September 1939, and proceeded to "give" Vilna to the Lithuanian Republic in October that year, Rabbi Kotler moved with as many yeshiva students as possible to Vilna (the Polish Wilno that

had just become the Lithuanian Vilnius), which was briefly in independent and free Lithuania (until the whole country was forcibly made a Soviet republic in the summer of 1940). Kotler and many of his pupils were rescued via Japanese transit visas issued by Japanese consul Chiune “Sempo” Sugihara (1900—1986). From Japan Kotler made it to the United States, and established the great yeshiva of Lakewood, New Jersey, which is in effect, the old Kletsker yeshiva, more retrospectively, the old Slutsker yeshiva that had moved to Kletsk and then via Japan to Lakewood. In America he established the *Vaad Hatsóloh* (Rescue Committee), which concentrated on getting Torah scholars out of a Europe in flames.

The Mir yeshiva (*di Mirer yeshive*) had an analogous escape. After similarly finding temporary refuge in independent Lithuania, they traveled with Japanese visas issued by Sugihara, by bus from Kovna (Kaunas) to Moscow; by the Trans-Siberian Railway to Vladivostok; by boat to Tsuruga, Japan; by train to Kobe, Japan and then on to Shanghai, China where they remained until 1947. Some eighty volumes, mostly reprographic copies of Lithuanian Jewish books, were published in Shanghai in the 1940s. Shanghai goes down in Jewish cultural history as a “port of rescue” from which the religious culture was to emerge, decimated but unquestionably alive and capable of begetting new generations of Torah scholars.

Other yeshivas that were largely destroyed were reconstituted by survivors in North America, western Europe and Israel. Some were

established by immigrants before the war, and then joined by refugees and survivors. One of the best known of these is in Gateshead on Tyne in northeastern England.

In modern Israel, the members of non-Hasidic Lithuanian style traditionalist orthodox communities are known as *Litaím* in modern Hebrew, even if many of their members have no personal links to Lithuania.



Lithuanian Hasidism followed the Misnagdic lead in establishing formal new institutions of higher rabbinic learning. Initially, in a newer (more localized and less rancorous) phase of the Misnagdic-Hasidic divide, some Hasidic powers that be, in communities in the “mixed” region southeast of Vilna and southwest of Minsk, staged “infiltrations” and “takeovers” of local yeshivas. The most famous cases are the yeshivas at Lida and Slonim (see the map on page 147). But in 1897, precisely a century after the death of the Gaon of Vilna, as fate would have it, the powerful Chabad movement in Lubavitch opened its own yeshiva, called *Téymkhey Tmímim* (as it is pronounced in the Lithuanian dialect of genuine Lubavitch Hasidim, or more informally, *Tómkhe Tmímim*). The name can be translated “Supporters of the upright.” Instead of different yeshivas being founded independently by personalities in different towns and cities, as had been the case among the Misnagdim, the Lubavitch movement organized a major coordinated effort to establish

branches of *Téymkhey Tmímim* in an array of cities and towns. The yeshivas marked in red on the map on p. 147 are the Lithuanian Hasidic yeshivas. Those called *Téymkhey Tmímim* are the yeshivas of the Lubavitch movement in Dokshetz (now in Belarus); Homle (Gomel, Belarus); Nevl (Nevel, Russia); Pólotsk (in Belarus); Tshernigov (Chernihiv, Ukraine); Zhlobin (Belarus); Zhembin (Belarus), and other locations.

The Lubavitch dynasty passed from Shneur-Zalmen (1745—1813) to his descendants right through to 1994. Their family name became Schneersohn (in other words: son of Shneur [-Zalmen]; its spelling derives from the Yiddish pronunciation *Shnéyer*). The rebbes after him were Dov-Ber of Lubavitch (1778—1827), Menachem-Mendel (1789—1866) better known as “the Tsémakh-Tsédek” after the title of his book by that name (which means “Branch of Righteousness,” itself after Jeremiah 23: 5, 33: 15); Shmuel Schneersohn known by his acronym “the rebbe Maharash” (1834—1882); Sholem Duber (1860—1920); Yeysef-Yitskhok Schneersohn (1880—1950), still known as *der frierdiker rebbe* (“the previous rebbe”) and Menachem-Mendel Schneerson (who dropped the last “h”), the final (?) rebbe (1902—1994).

The penultimate Lubavitch rebbe, Yeysef-Yitskhok (Joseph Isaac or Yosef Yitzhak) Schneersohn pulled off a remarkable feat during the early years of the Soviet Union. While Misnagdic leaders were saving their yeshivas from the Soviets by moving them across the border to Poland, or abroad, Yeysef-Yitskhok started build-

ing a network of *new* *Téymkhey Tmímim* yeshivas in the communist USSR, even as the Soviets were methodically (and with increasing brutality) dismantling the infrastructure of religion.

At the age of seventeen, right after his marriage, Yeysef-Yitskhok was appointed by his father to be the administrator of the just founded yeshiva *Téymkhey Tmímim* in the village of Lubavitch. He ended up turning a Hasidic *court* into a twentieth century *movement*. He became very active in Lithuanian rabbinic conferences. By then the movement came to be accepted as being within the mainstream of Lithuanian Jewry (while continuing to be Hasidic, albeit Lithuanian style). His public activism got him in trouble with the czarist authorities, and just like the Jewish revolutionaries at the opposite end of the Jewish cultural spectrum (see chapter 12), he was repeatedly arrested.

In 1920, when his father died, he became the new Rebbe (*der Lubávitsher rébe*), and redoubled his activist spirit, which was no doubt influenced by the spirit of the age and the modern Jewish movements in Europe. Unlike most of the southern Hasidic leaders, he accepted from the moderns the “spirit of a movement” and used the new tools to energize the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. He felt that traditionalist Jewish life could benefit by the new spirit, and should not remain a reclusive backseater while the anti-religious parties, groups and ideologies, such as socialism and secular Zionism, were winning over more and more people. The result of his vision is the vast and dynamic Lubavitch movement of the twenty-first century.

Realizing the limitations of what he could do in the USSR, Yeysef-Yitskhok Schneersohn established a Lubavitch yeshiva in Warsaw in 1921, but then returned to the Soviet Union to carry on his work there. After a stint in Rostov, he moved to Leningrad and resumed the work of organizing schools and yeshivas wherever he could. The map on p. 147 includes many of the yeshivas built or rebuilt by Schneersohn in the 1920s on the territory of Lita. There were more to the east in Russia itself. He was arrested in 1927 and sentenced to death. This was commuted to exile in the Urals, and after much international pressure, he was exiled. He moved to Latvia, traveled to the United States where he set up the Lubavitch movement, and then returned to Poland where he remained until the Nazi invasion. He arrived in New York in 1940 to a rapturous welcome. There was also a Lubavitch presence in Shanghai during the war years, alongside the Misnagdic yeshivas-in-exile. The seeds of postwar continuity of traditionalist Lithuanian Jewish religious culture were being planted even before war's end.

After Yeysef-Yitskhok's death in 1950, Menachem-Mendel Schneerson was appointed Rebbe and singlehandedly succeeded in reviving Lithuanian-Hasidic orthodoxy in the terrain of the United States where the enormous attraction of the popular secular culture and the opportunities open to all made many doubt that traditionalist orthodoxy could pull through. After building a powerful base in Brooklyn, New York, he sent emissaries (usually young rabbis from America or Israel) to the most far-flung corners of the globe

to establish traditional Lubavitch style communities and to try to convince secularized and irreligious Jews to "return" to the orthodox norms of the Jewish religion. To the cultural historian it is of course a profound and even uproarious irony that a movement that was once deemed ultra-radical, nihilistic, wanton, and feared to be undoing the laws and obligations of the ancient Jewish civilization, should today be reaching remote corners of the earth to insist that more and more non-observant modern Jews keep each and every law of that very civilization. In New York City, one of the typical tools has been the Lubavitch "Mitsva tank," a vehicle that stops on streetcorners seeking out Jewish people and persuading them to don phylacteries, or say a prayer, or endeavor to keep another of the commandments (mitsvas; Yiddish *mítsves*).

Menachem-Mendel Schneerson died childless. A sect within Lubavitch arose claiming he was the Messiah and will return, and posters proclaiming him to be Messiah continue to be distributed. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the group is well within the Jewish traditionalist orthodox mainstream, sometimes bordering in recent years more on the modern orthodox. Still, its powerful traditionalist wing maintains Lithuanian Yiddish as a living language much more securely than any group of Misnagdic or secular Litvaks. History is indeed full of ironies.



While the institution of the Lithuanian yeshiva survived the Holocaust, and Lithuanian Hasidism or its direct descendant thrives internationally, another important religious movement of pre-Holocaust Lithuanian Jewry has all but disappeared as a spiritual trend distinct from the others.

It is the *Muser* movement (Yiddish *Múser*, modern Hebrew *musár*, spelled variously in English: *musar*, *mussar*, etc.). In the Hebrew Bible, the term occurs in various senses. One that survived down the ages is the usage in the Book of Proverbs referring to well-intentioned reproof or chastisement, particularly the spirit in which parents tell off children to make of them better people. The King James version famously translated it as “instruction” in a special sense, as in “My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother” (Proverbs 1: 8); or “Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise” (19: 20).

Over the millennia, the word acquired meanings akin to the modern sense of “morals,” “morality” and “ethics.” Jewish works on such subjects as human character are usually traced to a chain that started with a work by Saadiah Gaon, a leader of the Jews of Babylonia in the ninth century, and was continued in Sepharad in the writings of the eleventh century poet and philosopher Ibn Gabirol. A classical work of the subject, was written by the late eleventh century Sephardic scholar Bahya ibn Paquda in Jewish Arabic, and became immortalized in an 1161 Hebrew translation under the title *Obligations of the Heart* (literally “hearts” in the plural). Influenced by Muslim writings, the book sets out a progression of stages

of development of the inner life, the “obligations of the heart,” which are distinguished from those of the body (legal obligations, actions and so forth).

A further stage came in medieval Ashkenaz. The “Hasidim of Ashkenaz” movement (see p. 40) developed a rich ethical literature. That group’s most famous work, the *Seyfer Khasidim* (*Sefer Hasidim*; see p. 40), traced to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, concentrates not on the development of a logical system of human attributes in the vein of the Sephardic works, but rather on the practical situations which people of the day (and in many cases of any period) can find themselves involved in. A person’s way of dealing with other people is of paramount importance in the work. The group’s leading figure, Judah of Regensburg (*Yehúde Khósid*, ± 1150 — 1217), stressed extraordinary humility. What is perhaps most striking to the modern reader in the ethical literature of the period is the notion that ethical behavior is at its highest level where there is no easy logic, but is just the right thing to do. Whether on a strictly religious or an interpersonal matter, what is right is done because of “blind” acceptance of its rightness. In the culture in question there could of course be no categorical division into “religious” and “ethical.” Nevertheless, the “law of Heaven,” representing matters of the heart and matters of conscience, is considered a higher level than just the precepts of the Torah which are categorically laid out. There has been speculation on the Christian influences on the ethical literature of Ashkenaz, analogous to the Muslim impact on the Sephardic ethicists.

For many centuries, various works from the diverse strands of *Muser* literature became popular and were rewritten, reprinted, translated and widely disseminated throughout Jewish Europe. We have seen that the strictest of “narrow constructors of Jewish law,” the Gaon of Vilna himself, placed great value on this non-legal literature, urging that the translations into Yiddish of these works be studied extensively by the members of his own family (see p. 91). It might be fair to say that the Gaon considered this literature, and more generally, concentration on improvement of strength of character, as a necessary supplement to the core of Talmudic study. It might also be fair to say that he considered it of potentially central value for the large part of the Jewish population — the majority of men and virtually all women — who were not Talmudists, but could work on character, ethics and morals every bit as much as the Torah scholars.

When the Hasidic-Misnagdic conflict died down in the early nineteenth century, a new movement arose in the west of Lithuania (Zamet) that came to be called the Muser Movement. Its followers are known simply as *di Músernikes* (“the Muserniks”).

There were times and places where Muser appeared to be an emergent “Third Way” between the Misnagdim and the special kind of Hasidim in Lithuania. It arose in Salánt (now Salantai, Lithuania). Its precursor was Zundel of Salánt, and its great leader was Yisróel (Israel) of Salánt. Like Vilna for Litvaks in general, Valózhin for Misnagdim and Lubavitch for Lithuanian

Hasidim, the name Salánt came to have a heart-throbbing aura of sanctity.

Zundel of Salánt (Yeysef-Zundel son of Benyomin-Beynish, 1786—1866) was a student of Chaim of Valozhin, making for a direct line of intellectual evolution from the classical Misnagdim to the Muserniks. He made a point not only of propounding extraordinary modesty but of living it out as well. He dressed like a rural peasant, not to let on that he was a scholar, and perhaps primarily to work at all sorts of jobs in his life, behaving with the utmost care toward Jewish and non-Jewish customers alike, earning the minimum needed to live, beyond which he would spend his time immersed in Torah study. He turned down lucrative rabbinical positions and after a time in Vilna emigrated to Jerusalem.

According to the “founding story” of the Muser movement “it was like this”:

In the Lithuanian town Zhager (now Žagarė), there was a little boy called Yisroel, born in 1810. He was a child prodigy at Torah studies, and amazed the townspeople with his sharpness. His father, Zev-Volf Lipkin, a rabbinic scholar, was a staunch Litvak in the Gaon’s mold and was unhappy that his little boy’s acumen was drifting toward pilpul and fantastic explanations. So, at the age of ten, little Yisroel was sent out west to study *pshat* (the method of seeking out the simple meaning of a text) under the great rabbi Tzvi-Hirsh Brojde of Salánt. Around the age of fourteen, he took a walk and happened to encounter Yeysef-Zundel — Zundel of Salánt — standing in a pine forest, weeping loudly, and repeating a verse

about the greatness of God and the littleness of humans. This holy man told the boy: “Study *Muser*, and you will become a truly Godfearing person!” He taught him the spirituality of intense study of the ethical literature, with a sad tune that differs from the traditional chant of Talmudic study, in complete isolation from other people. Yisroel, launched on his life’s work, never looked back.

The geographic epithet “Salanter” came to be used as Yisroel’s surname, and “Lipkin” was forgotten. He is also known in Lithuanian Jewish lore (and beyond) simply as *der Salanter* (“the man from Salánt”). Salanter’s biography was tumultuous, and more than once, his movement was feared as “yet another dangerous movement” that could do damage to traditional scholarship. But this time, the battleground was mostly limited to a number of Lithuanian yeshivas and the effect on the population at large was felt only when Salanter or another of the handful of charismatic leaders of the movement were personally active in a town.

A lot has been written about Salanter’s decade in Vilna (1840—1849). He preached the message that people should think long and hard before any business deal. He pointed out that pious Jews spend a lot of time concentrating on difficult matters of law in the study of Torah, but virtually nobody spends time working on their conduct and character and how to fight the natural urges, impulses and passions that lead people astray every day of their lives.

Salanter’s stubborn personality, remarkable personal humility, and adherence to a minimalist life style, all the while holding his own

among the greatest Talmudic scholars of his time, amalgamated to make him a sensational personality in the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” His strategy for overcoming the passions and evil inclinations that lead people astray was classically pre-Freudian. He argued that it was vital to become psychologically intimate with the sources of those passions because “passion gives way to passion.” The notions of being humble, fearful of God and conscious of the need to build our characters must overwhelm the intellect and themselves become a singleminded (obsessive) passion or they cannot win out.

One swift tangible result was a wave of reprints of classical works of the Jewish ethical literature. Those treatises had been written over a period of more than a thousand years in Babylonia, Spain, Ashkenaz and other major Jewish centers. Now they were being reprinted in one time and place — mid-nineteenth century Vilna — leading to the de facto creation of a “Muser library,” not as a sum total of books written over many centuries in different circumstances, but as those same books newly reconceptualized as forming a structured program for the human soul, and, a curriculum fit for systematic study.

Salanter therefore established a *Muser-shtibl* (“Little House of Muser”). This was in the studyhouse where he taught in the Zarétshe section of Vilna (now the fashionable Užupis section of Vilnius), and which was a beloved Jewish landmark in the city right up until the Holocaust. This was part of a wider effort to institutionalize and “mainstreamize” Muser. The work of becoming

a better person had to be the focus of conscious effort with dedicated time and established practices. Among these were a Muser hour at dusk when members of a group would study and meditate together in that special sad chant, lamenting their own character failures, confronting them and deciding to work on them. Yes, it all sounds so modern.

He was so impressive as a “straight Talmudist” that he was appointed head of the prestigious Ramáyles Yeshiva in Vilna when he was barely thirty. But when he saw his rapid rise in stature and popularity causing much pain to the older, previous head, he stepped down and set up his *Muser-shtibl*, exchanging a good income for a poor one. When questioned, he insisted on the importance of setting an example of the need to do the right thing even when the wrong that occurred was not one’s own fault.

There are accounts of Salanter’s fiery talks to laymen about the evil of even the slightest dishonesty in business; of businessmen coming to him in tears to confess that they could not continue as businesspeople with complete honesty and are therefore giving up their enterprises to become laborers so that they would not be tempted. He established a *Khevre Muser* or “Muser Society” along the lines of existing societies for the study of Mishna, Psalms and other branches of Jewish learning.

Salanter had a radical plan for producing a Talmud dictionary in Yiddish that would give the key to higher Torah learning to the masses of simple people. The plan did not go very far. An-

other idea that met with little enthusiasm from any quarter was his plan to spread knowledge of the Talmud among Gentiles. He thought this would benefit them and Jews alike.

Far from being a quiet, lovable figure, Salanter became known as the fierce rebuker. While it is hard to know which of the many stories are historical and which apocryphal, the cumulative reports that have come down paint the portrait of a latter day Lithuanian Jewish prophet constantly reminding his people that to live a good, honest life was even more important than studying Talmud and obeying all those six hundred and thirteen commandments.

During a cholera epidemic, Salanter organized all his students into first-aid squads, insisting that they violate the Sabbath in order to save lives. Although Jewish law clearly states that a life threatening situation trumps Sabbath prohibitions, it was the generality of the dispensation that caused conflict. Matters got worse when he pasted up Vilna with posters during the epidemic declaring that it is necessary to *not* fast on the Day of Atonement, the fast day regarded as the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

When the Russian government and their assimilationist Jewish advisors were setting up a modern rabbinical seminary in Vilna in the late 1840s, Salanter found himself under great pressure to accept a teaching post there. The organizers wanted traditionally acceptable rabbinic leaders to participate in order to give the place credibility. Salanter responded by leaving town for good. His departure is seen by some as a result of

the string of controversies he had been involved in, and by others as exclusively the result of the rabbinic seminary episode.

He moved to Kovna (now Kaunas). Here he founded a major yeshiva. Many of its hundred and fifty or so pupils went on to become rabbinic leaders of the following generation. While in Vilna his emphasis had been on the wider public, in Kovna it was on the yeshiva circles. This was the beginning of the Muser yeshiva movement. In a Muser oriented yeshiva, a sizable portion of the curriculum comprised Muser literature and there was considerable attention given to practical training to enable young people to learn to overcome their urges and constantly question their actions with a constant eye to self improvement.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Slabódke section of Kovna had become a major Lithuanian yeshiva center. The leading rabbi in town was the famed Yitskhok-Elkhonon Spektor (1817—1896). He was not at all happy about Salanter's efforts to "reform" the yeshivas of Lithuania with Muser.

The major Muser yeshivas are illustrated in green in the map of Lithuanian yeshivas on p. 147. One of the two yeshivas, the *Kóylel ha-prúshim*, was the scene of a "muser revolution" and the other became so hopelessly divided that it split into two yeshivas. A similar "takeover" took place at the famous *Télzer yeshíve* (in Telz, now Telšiai, Lithuania). In another case, one of Salanter's disciples, Simkhe-Zisl Ziv-Broyde (1824—1898), became renowned as a master of Muser in Kélem (Kelmė, Lithuania), where he

founded a Muser yeshiva in 1872. After an unfortunate dispute in town, he moved and refounded it in Grobin, Courland (now Grobina, Latvia) in 1880, where it became world famous and trained many rabbinic leaders of the next generation. Moreover, it became one of the few yeshivas to incorporate modern studies alongside the most traditional Talmudic studies. This is indicated in the map on page 147 by the vertical black lines. There was, incidentally, one famous Misnagdic yeshiva that went in the same direction, and it too involved a conflict that led its founder to relocate. This was the yeshiva of Yitskhok-Yankev (Isaac Jacob) Reines (1839—1915), founded in Svintsyán (now Švenčionys, Lithuania) in 1882. The town was not ready for a modernist yeshiva and he moved down south to Lida (now in Belarus) in 1885, where his yeshiva became a model for traditionalist education that incorporates modern studies too. These two parallel moves by heads of yeshiva are marked by the "geographic arrows" on the map of yeshivas.

Over the decades, Salanter acquired the personal mystique of the guru that was characteristic of a Hasidic rebbe and not a Lithuanian rabbi. But instead of claiming any divine powers (much less authority via genes or the superior soul of a *tsádik*), he played the role rather of an Old Testament prophet who storms for justice. One famous tale relates to his return to Salánt after many years. A very poor woman came crying to him, explaining that her son had been "chosen" by the community to fulfill the government's quota for the draft into the czarist army. The fol-

lowing Sabbath, when prayers were over, and the community made a reception in his honor, he stormed at the heads of the Jewish community, calling out “Murderers and Kidnappers!” He rebuked each and every head of the community, carefully citing the care with which each carried out his most beloved religious commandments. One wore a handkerchief around his neck so as not to “carry” on the Sabbath (even though the town had an *éyruv* wire which permits carrying in the area within); another took extraordinary care over the kosherness of the matzah (unleavened bread eaten on Passover). Yet they failed to even consider that they were committing a reprehensible sin by choosing the son of a poor widow for their quota. Far from being satisfied with himself for saving the boy, he started a movement for rescuing poor children from the czarist draft.

A few of Salanter’s sayings have entered Yiddish folklore. Among the most famous are:

“People live with themselves for seventy years without getting to know themselves.”

“A rabbi whom the townspeople don’t want to chase out of town is no rabbi, and one who can be chased out is not a man.”

“There is no illness greater than despair.”

On this last point, the evil of depression, there was a definite point of congruence with Hasidim, but it was only one point. Still, the presence of a growing and sometimes confrontational spiritual movement led some Litvaks to call the Muserniks *di khsidim fun Zámét* (“the Hasidim of Zámét”).

Yisroel of Salánt was never one to shirk from a reply. He quipped (after meeting the con-

temporary Lubavitch rebbe who did not impress him much):

“The Hasidim think that they have a rebbe. The Misnagdim think that they don’t need a rebbe. They are equally mistaken.”

The Muser movement proved itself capable of inspiring and spiritualizing simple and learned people, men and women alike. It synthesized its ethical teachings and practice with *torah* study as curriculum for the best Lithuanian yeshivas. It also proved itself to be a reliable partner to the other two branches in the common goal of battling the secularist modernizers who were burgeoning in the nineteenth century, but without opposing the *study* of secular subjects. Why did it not become the Third Way of traditional religious Lithuanian Judaism in a bigger way?

There are different answers to this question. One of the simplest would be to say that the movement stalled out when its guru “ran away” from Lithuania (in violation, one might remark, of his own above-quoted adage about the need for a rabbi not to flee just because people want him to, but then again, this man was sincerely into profound self-criticism). He shocked his supporters around the world by settling in Germany and eventually becoming a Prussian citizen, even though he had persuasive arguments about the urgent need to bring rapidly assimilating German Jewry back to its traditional religious roots.

Detractors of the Muser movement see an abdication of leadership in his migration across the border. Although the distance was not particularly far in miles, it was very far in culture. He had, they

said, forsaken Lithuanian Jewry for the bluer skies of a Jewish community that had long lost its intense traditional Jewish culture, and where he could enjoy teaching the basics of orthodox Judaism.

His supporters look at it differently. They claim that he succeeded in establishing a Muser movement, in injecting Muser into some of the greatest extant Lithuanian yeshivas and building new ones explicitly to forward the movement's emphases within Judaism. They point to the many adherents of Muser among generations of yeshiva graduates, and above all to the fact that Muser was in the end incorporated in differing degrees into the yeshiva curriculum. All in all, the claim is that he took Muser as far as he could in Lithuania and his new goal was to settle somewhere where the battle of tradition vs. secularism had allegedly been lost, and to help part of those communities return to their roots. He never learned to speak German, and ended up being a respected representative of Lithuanian Jewish traditional culture for Prussian Jewry, in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad, in the Russian Federation), and particularly in Memel (now Klaipėda, Lithuania), where he lived almost twenty years. Memel was a border town spanning Lithuanian and German Jewish culture, and this enabled him to live in the midst of Lithuanian and German Jews in the one city where the two Jewish cultures coexisted.

In his German period, Salanter moved closer to what is now known as "neo-orthodoxy," the modern version of orthodox observance founded in Germany in the nineteenth century. He founded a magazine devoted to Torah studies

(*Tvuno*, "Understanding," in 1861 — four issues in Memel and eight in Königsberg), inspiring leading rabbis to try their hand at this new (and very western) genre.

In his later years he could not escape the recurring question about his migration, and answered, as was his wont, with a parable. "Horses go wild pulling a wagon down a mountainside. If the wagoner tries to stop them downhill, he will be trampled to death. He has to wait until the horse reaches the bottom of the mountain. Then he can grab them and fix the harnesses." Some in Lithuania were edging toward modernity and secularism. In Germany it had already happened, and he would be of more use there.

Salanter also tried his luck in Paris briefly (in 1880), but things did not work out.

For Salanter it was a tragedy that his son, Lipman Lipkin, left Jewish religious life to pursue mathematics and physics. He studied at Königsberg and Jena and moved to St. Petersburg. Dr. Lipkin developed a kinematic system, and invented a mechanical device for changing linear motion into circular motion, known in the field as the "Lipkin parallelogram." Salanter had enormous respect for such endeavors but believed that they could go hand in hand with continuing adherence to one's religious traditions and beliefs. It is ironic that for all his "extremism" in the eyes of many traditional Litvaks, Salanter was considered to be the "acceptable face of traditionalist orthodoxy" by the secularists and radicals (see chapters 11 and 12). It is no coincidence that it was he who was pressured to teach rabbinics at the czar's new rabbinic college in Vilna in the late 1840s.

During Salanter's long residence in Germany, the Muser movement (not unpredictably) split into two factions. First there were the moderates who were on the whole content to incorporate Salanter's practices of setting a fixed time and place for introspection, study of ethical texts and so forth. The second were considered extremists. This branch became known as *Naváredker* (those from Naváredok, now Navahradak or Novogrudok, Belarus). They were followers of Yeysef-Yeyzl, known as *der alter fun Naváredok* ("the old man of Naváredok"). The Old Man of Naváredok spent most of his time in seclusion in a hut deep in the forest several miles from Lupts (Lyutsha), where another leading Musernik, Isaac Blazer (better known as Reb Itsele Péterburger, 1837—1907) had set up a place of learning based on Muser.

The young men of the Naváredok branch were constantly rebuking themselves *and* everyone else around them about failures of behavior in even the smallest things in everyday life. In some cases this reached the point of public nuisance. There were also practical "tests" designed to strengthen character in the sense of trying to overcome caring what other people think. One would be sent to a pharmacy to ask to buy nails. Another would ask for food in a clothing shop. The purpose of such actions was to train oneself to not care about being laughed at. It was verily the Lithuanian Jewish equivalent of "fraternity tests" at modern universities.

The word "riot" that occurs in the literature might be too strong, but in 1897 there was a serious disturbance at the Slabódke yeshiva in Kovna as differences between the more extreme Muserniks and their detractors came to blows. The end of the century might well be taken as a point of steep, sudden decline of the movement, though it continued to flourish in a few yeshivas, and a new academy was established in its spirit in Pinsk in the 1920s (see the yeshiva map on p. 147).

The inner (and outer!) world of the Muserniks is best described by the great Yiddish author Chaim Grade (1910—1982), of Vilna and New York (see p. 247). The interested reader is referred particularly to his longer poem *Músernikes* ("Muserniks") and his masterpiece epic novel, *Tzemakh Atlas* (also called *The Yeshiva*), available in the fine English translation of Curt Leviant.

One of the geo-cultural effects of the Muser movement was to raise western Lita — Zámet — to prominence as the heartland of an innovative approach within traditional Judaism. It might be a stereotype and an exaggeration to say it, but there is probably some truth in the remark, that if one traveled from the Baltic Sea eastward, through communities of traditional rabbinic scholars and their pupils, one encountered successively the sad, introspective sunset melody of the Muserniks in the west; the inquiring question and answer melody of the classic Lithuanian Talmudic scholar in the middle; and the rapturous singing of the Chabad Hasidim in the east.

From the world of Lithuanian Torah



Leyzer Ran Collection

Yitskhok-Elkhanon Spektor

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Yitskhok-Elkhanon (Isaac Elchanan) Spektor (1817—1896). Born in Rosh, Grodna Province, Spektor went on to hold various rabbinic posts until he settled in Kovna in 1864. He became a popular leader of Lithuanian Jewry and founded a great yeshiva there (see map on p. 147). In addition to his teaching and his commentaries, he was known as a man of action who fought hard and strong to mitigate czarist edicts, participating twice in meetings in St. Petersburg. He was also quick to seek out aid for victims of poverty and disasters. In his rabbinic decisions he always tried to find a way to be lenient.



Leyzer Ran Collection

Joseph Zecharia Shtern

Joseph Zecharia Shtern (1831—1903) was born in Nayshtot-Shirvint (also called Nayshtot-Shaki), now Kudirkos Naumiestis, Lithuania. He spent a decade as rabbi of Yasinovke, Grodna Province before settling in Shavl (now Šiauliai, Lithuania), in the Kovna region. He was a brilliant Talmudist and polemicized against the reformers who were colluding with the czarist authorities to reform traditional Jewish education. In modern Hebrew literature, he is best known for having been the object of a satire by poet Judah Leib Gordon (see p. 232). In the poem the letters of the rabbi's name are scrambled to produce the fictional name *Vafsi ha-Kuzari* ("Vafsi the Kazar").

The Chofetz-Chaim (1838—1933). His real name was Yisroel-Meir ha-Koyhen (he even had two family names, Kagan and Pupko, but they were quite unknown). *Chofetz-Chaim* was the name of his first book (published in Vilna in 1873); it means "desiring life" and it comes from the Book of Psalms: "Who is the man that



Joseph Friedenson, *Doz jidshe ort* (N.Y.)

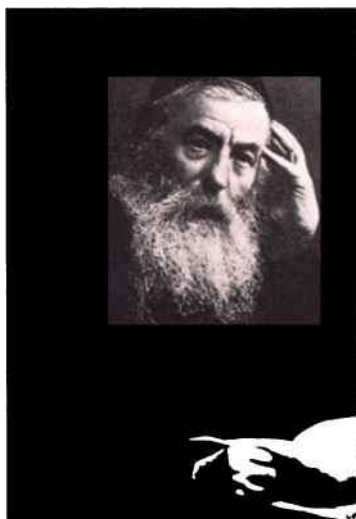
The Chofetz-Chaim

desireth life, and loveth days, that he may see good therein? Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile” (Psalms 34: 13-14). In fact, the book is a treatise against gossip and badmouthing. He went on to write another twenty books, and became one of the most beloved rabbinic figures in Lithuania. His yeshiva was the only one in history that “founded itself.” Around 1869 students from all over flocked to his tiny village Radin, which has become world famous thanks to its illustrious resident.



Leyzer Ran Collection

The Chofetz-Chaim's famous yeshiva in Radin



Leyzer Ran Collection

Yitshok-Yankev Reines

Yitshok-Yankev Reines (1839—1915) was a prolific scholar and a dynamic leader who continued the Gaon's tradition of perfecting Talmudic research methodology based on logic (and *Logic* is the name of one of his best known works). He also believed a yeshiva could be fully traditional while including modern studies. When his experimental yeshiva in Svintsyán (now Švenčionys, Lithuania) was unraveled by local conflict after only a few months, he started over again in Lida (now in Belarus), and built a successful institution — the Lida yeshiva founded in 1905 — combining bona fide yeshiva studies with modern subjects.

The Ridbáz (1845—1913) was a major Talmudic commentator (specializing in the Jerusalem Talmud) whose life took him from his native Kobrin (not far from Brisk), to Izballin, to Bobroysk, to Vilna, to Slutsk (where he founded a yeshiva), to Chicago (which he left because of the non-religious American environment), to Safad, in the northern Galilee in the Land of Israel, where he founded another yeshiva (which still exists). He became a controversial conservative in legal matters, insisting that the land not be worked in the seventh sabbatical year, in accordance with Biblical law. His popular appellation Ridbaz is an acronym of his name Rabbi Yankev Dovid ben Z'evy.



Leyzer Ran Collection

The Ridbáz



Chaim Soloveitchik

Chaim Soloveitchik (1853—1918) was a product of the great Valozhin Yeshiva (founded in 1802 by the Gaon of Vilna's pupil Chaim of Valozhin). He was the son of one of the yeshiva's leading instructors, was born in Valozhin and went on to develop new methodology based in part on subdividing complex problems into their component parts. When the czarist government closed down the yeshiva in 1892 (because of a refusal to introduce secular subjects), he moved to Brisk (Brest, Belarus), where he succeeded his father as chief rabbi, becoming famous for his learning and for his social activism on behalf of the needy. He often gave away his earnings to poor people. He remains known as the *Brisker rov* (the rabbi of Brisk).



The Valozhin Yeshiva

The duo in Dvinsk. One, known as “the *Or Someyakh*” (after a famous book of his) was a Misnaged, a classic Lithuanian rabbinic follower of the Gaon of Vilna. His real name was Meir-Simcha ha-Koyhen of Dvinsk (1843—1926). The other, known as “the *Rogetshover*” (after his birth place Rogetshov, now Rahačou in eastern Belarus) was Hasidic, a follower of the Lubavitch branch of Lithuanian Hasidism. His real name was Joseph Rozin.

The Or Someyakh and the Rogetshover were both geniuses, both devoted much of their lives to commentaries on Maimonides and both were the chief rabbis of their communities within Dvinsk (now Daugavpils, Latvia): the Or Someyakh for the Misnagdim in town, and the Rogetshover for the Hasidim.

During the Soviet period, the old Jewish cemeteries in Dvinsk were destroyed, but at the behest of the Jewish community (which has maintained one small synagogue uninterruptedly since the war), the graves of both leaders of Jewish Dvinsk were moved to the new cemetery, where they lie right next to each other.



The Or Someyakh
(Meir-Simcha ha-
Koyhen of Dvinsk)



The Rogetshover
(Joseph Rozin)



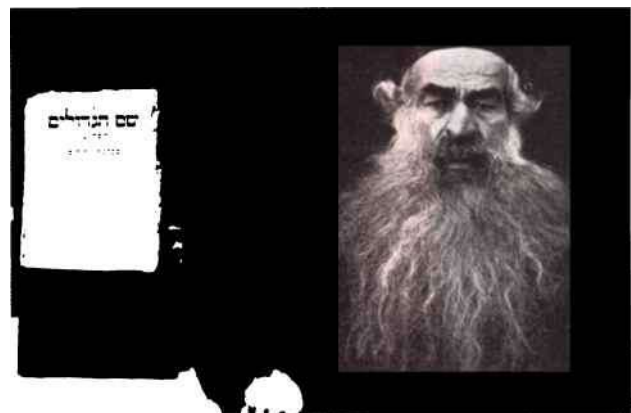
Yeysef-Yitskhok Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, who courageously set up a network of yeshivas in the Soviet Union in the 1920s.

Yeysef-Yitskhok (Joseph Isaac) Schneersohn (1880—1950) was the sixth *rebbe* of the Lubavitch movement. In the spirit of the movement’s founder, his ancestor Shneur-Zalmen, who had built an edifice combining Hasidic rapture with Lithuanian Jewish learning, he devoted much of his life to building new yeshivas. The geographic compass of his energetic work was centered in the historic homeland of the movement, eastern Lita (now eastern Belarus). Perhaps the most amazing part of this man’s life transpired during the years he built up a network of yeshivas in the Soviet Union (in the Belorussian, and also other republics). To do so under the Communist regime was something close to miraculous. He was finally arrested in 1927, but released to go abroad after

massive international pressure. He spent some years in Latvia and Poland, setting up yeshivas wherever he sojourned. He was able to escape to the United States in 1940 where he helped build the Lithuanian Hasidic movement, named for that village Lubavitch, into a powerful movement.

One of many remarkable characters among Lithuanian Jewish scholars, Meyshale Markovitz was a shoemaker, whose father had turned to farming after failing as a tailor. Born in 1855 in the village Namóksht (Nemakščiai, Lithuania), Meyshale Markovitz spent most of his life in the nearby shtetl Raséyn (Raseiniai). As a young man who liked to buy Yiddish story books from the *pákntreger*, the traveling bookseller, he once came across a volume of rabbinic biography and bibliography by the great scholar Chaim Joseph David Azulai (1724—1806). Azulai, of Jerusalem and later, Livorno (Leghorn, Italy), had written two volumes called *Shem ha-Gdóylim* (*Shem ha-Gedolim*, “Name of the Great Ones”). The shoemaker from Raséyn decided that he would in his lifetime produce a “volume three” which would tell of the life, times, and books of the great Jewish scholars of Lithuania. Everybody laughed at the shoemaker who could not even write Hebrew properly and would for years ask other people to write notes for him for the book. But after working on the project non-stop for thirty-eight years, his two volumes (*Shem ha-Gdóylim ha-shlishi*, “The Third Book of Name of the

The shoemaker of Raséyn and his famous book.



Menke Katz Collection

Great Ones” parts I and II) appeared in Vilna in 1910. It is an indispensable tool for the history of rabbinic culture in Lithuania. He was also in love with the Jewish history of Lithuanian towns, and the scholars in each. He published works on Rascyn, Keydan (now Kėdainiai, Lithuania), and Naváredok (Nowogrudok, now Navahrudak, Belarus), all in 1913.

Chaim-Eyzer (Chaim-Oyzer, Hayyim-Ozer) Grodzenski (1863—1940) was the last *Vilner rov* or “city rabbi of Vilna.” The formality was not quite such, as the Vilna community had decided not to have a “chief rabbi” at all since a complicated dispute between two pretenders back in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, this great scholar was popularly crowned *Vilner rov*, and, with the impending Holocaust, he was, retrospectively speaking, the last pre-war rabbi of Vilna. In addition to his works on Jewish law, he devoted many years to strengthening the yeshiva movement. He initiated a conference in Grodna in 1924 which resulted in the establishment of the *Vaad ha-yeshivos* (Council for Yeshivas). He was opposed to Zionism, emigration, modernization and laxity in the observance of Jewish law. Nevertheless, in his personal conduct he was tolerant and respectful. When the great Dr. Tsemakh Shabad (see p. 289), a socialist by conviction, died in 1935, Chaim-Eyzer, as he was universally known in Vilna Yiddish, came to the funeral to pay his respects to a great man. The second-floor balcony from which he would greet visitors on Zavalna Street, corner of Pohulanka (now Pylimo, corner of Basanavičiaus in Vilnius) still stands. His students who survived the war would say of Chaim-Eyzer: “He had the good fortune to die of a broken heart when the Soviets closed down his yeshiva in 1940.” The Nazis invaded in June 1941.



Eyzer Rov Collection

The last *Vilner rov*,
Chaim-Eyzer
Grodzenski



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

A religious school and teacher
training seminary for young
women in Kovna.

The *Kloze Shas* (Talmud
studying society) in Anikshu
(now Anykščiai, Lithuania)



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The *Kloze Shas* (Talmud
studying society) in Iyze
(now Iūže, Belarus)



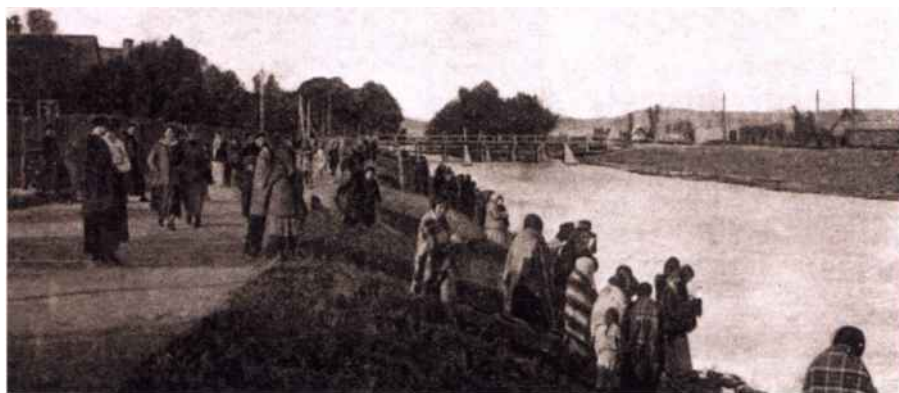
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Praying on his own in Slonim



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Táshlikh in Slonim

On the first day of the two-day *Rosh-Hashona* new year's holiday (which falls most often in September), it is traditional to perform the ancient, and simple ceremony called *Táshlikh*, whereby one's sins are symbolically shaken out of one's pockets and "thrown" into a sea, river or running stream. Here, Jews of Slonim (now in Belarus) carry out Tashlikh. The word means "Thou wilt cast" and it comes from a passage in the Prophet Micah: "And Thou wilt cast all their sins in the depths of the sea" (7: 18).

Synagogues are not all the same . . .



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Grodna (Grodno, now Hrodna, Belarus)



Lida (Lida, Belarus):

bimahesh (in

foreground) and *shul*

The Jewish communities of Lithuania, like those throughout Eastern Europe, had a wide variety of houses of prayer. They came in many shapes and sizes, ranging from diminutive wooden shacks all the way to grand stone edifices. Different categories of prayerhouses had distinct functions and different names in Yiddish. It is entirely natural that current residents in many towns refer to the extant pre-war Jewish prayerhouses using the local form of the word “synagogue.” But things are always more complex when a culture is looked at from within.

The high-ceilinged *shul* generally had a women’s section, very often on a mezzanine that looked down from three sides onto the *bíme* (*bima*), providing the best theater-quality views of the action at the center down below. The *shul* was often unheated and was used for the warmer part of the year, stretching from before the spring holiday of Passover to after the High Holy Days in the



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Draya (Belarus)

autumn, which include *Rosh Hashona* (Yiddish *Rosheshóne*, the Jewish new year), *Yom Kippur* (*Yomkíper*, the Day of Atonement), and *Sukkos* (*Súkes*, The Feast of Tabernacles). The rest of the year the *shul* was closed in many localities, though some had heated wings for smaller groups of people all year round. The *shul* could be made of wood or of masonry (brick or stone). When it was an unheated structure, the shtetl *shul* was often called (with a little humor) *di kálte shul* (literally “the cold synagogue”).

The *bismédresh* (*beys-medrosh*, *beis-hamidrash*, *beth midrash* etc.), by contrast, doubled as both a house of study and a house of prayer. In many towns the *bismédresh* was open day and night so anyone could come, pull out a tome of the Talmud or one of its commentaries, and sit down and study by daylight or by candlelight. The three daily prayers (*shákhris* in the morning, *mínkhe* in the afternoon and *máyrev* in the evening) were carried out communally in the *bismédresh* throughout the year. It is a smaller structure that can be heated during the cold months. It usually does not have a women’s section because women are not obligated by the daily prayers and generally attended a larger *shul* on holidays and Sabbaths.

Sometimes even a small shtetl had a number of *bótey-midróshim* (plural of *bismédresh*). Svintsyán (now Švenčionys, Lithuania) was well known for its *alter bismédresh* (Old Studyhouse) and its *nayer bismédresh* (New Studyhouse). Zhetl, now (Dzyatlava, Belarus) was renowned for its three studyhouses: *der*

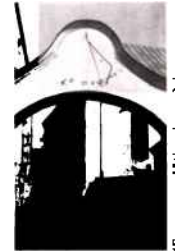
alter bismédresh, *der nayer bismédresh*, and — *der miteler bismédresh* (The Middle Studyhouse). In a shtetl where traditional Jewish culture flourished for centuries it not infrequently happened that the “new” studyhouse was itself hundreds of years old.

Lithuanian Yiddish also has a third word for a prayerhouse: the *kloyz*, which was usually smaller than the *shul* (but in some towns just became the popular word for any prayerhouse). Sometimes the *kloyz* was limited to members of a certain trade, as in *di shnaydershe kloyz* (tailors’ prayerhouse), *di shustershe kloyz* (shoemakers’ prayerhouse), and so forth. Modern Yiddish has



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Binsk d’Lite (Brest, Belarus)



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Keydán (Kėdėimai, Lithuania) sundial over the entranceway to its *dul beif* (synagogue courtyard)

coined the word *klayzidik* in the sense of “factional” from the old notion of the *kloyz*. But a prayerhouse started by members of one trade could grow over time to encompass a much wider membership, while keeping its old name. And some trades often predominated in certain locations. Therefore one finds, say, all kinds of Jewish prayerhouses named for say, the tailors, starting from *der shnaydersher minyen* and reaching right up to *di shnaydershe shul*.

The photograph from prewar Kelm (or Kelem, now Kelm, Lithuania), shows from left to right: the *kloyz*, the *bismédresh*, and the *shul*. These were frequently referred to outside town together with the town’s name in Yiddish adjective form: *Kelmer kloyz*, *Kelmer bismédresh*, *Kelmer shul*.

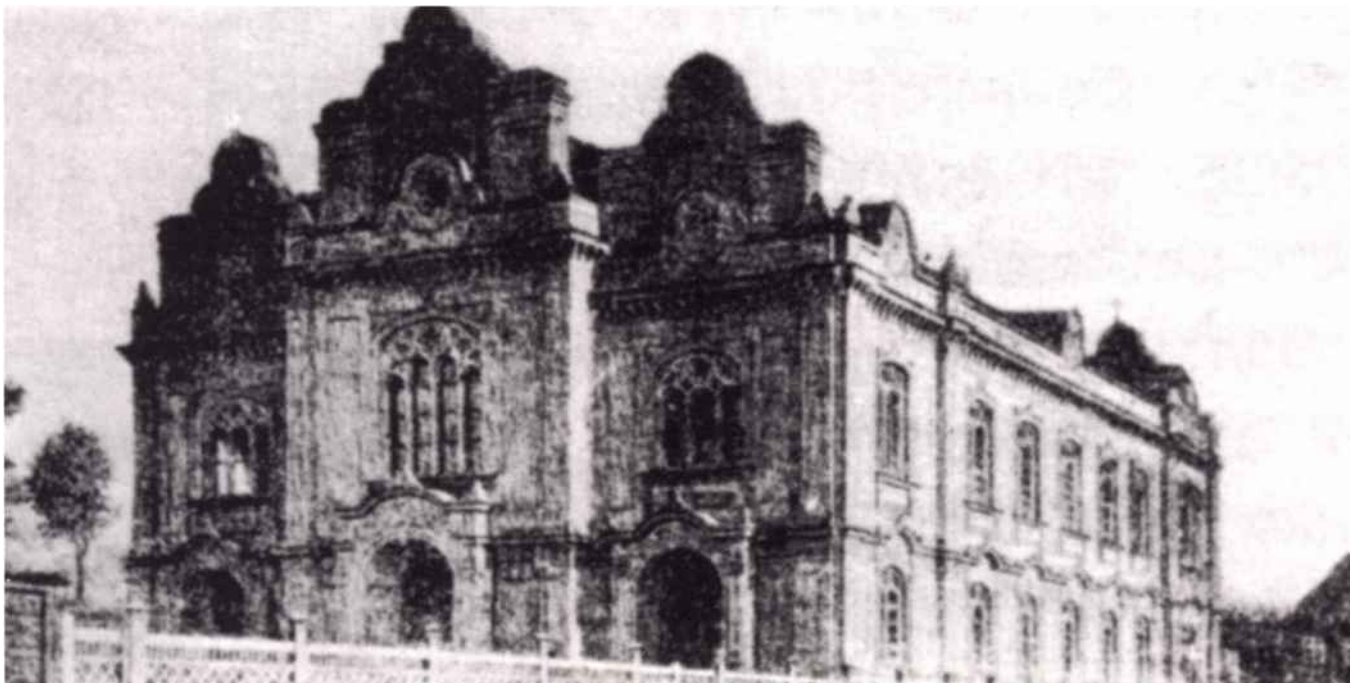
It was frequently the case that the various prayerhouses and studyhouses were clustered around a courtyard known in Lithuanian Yiddish as the *shul-heyf* (standard Yiddish *shul-hoyf* “the synagogue yard”), rendered *shúlef* in rapid speech. The image from Keydán (now Kėdainiai) shows the famous sundial that marked the entranceway to that town’s *shul-heyf*.

In many towns in historical central Lithuania (now eastern Lithuania and western Belarus), there were minority prayerhouses belonging to the Chabad-Lubavitch movement of Lithuanian Hasidim. Such prayerhouses



Kelem (Kelmė, Lithuania)

left to right, *kloyz*, *bismédresh* and *shul*



Riga (Latvia)



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection
Białystok

Zhidik (Žydikių, Lithuania)

could be known, say, as *di khsídíshe kloyz* (“the little Hasidic prayerhouse”) or *der khsídisher mínyen* (“the Hasidic quorum,” referring to the quorum of ten men over the age of majority, thirteen, needed for prayer; it came to be used colloquially for the structure itself). In historical eastern Lithuania (now eastern Belarus), where the Chabad-Lubavitch synagogues were in the majority, and the Misnagdim in the minority, the misnagdic prayerhouses were the ones singled out as *di misnágdishe kloyz* (“the little misnagdic prayerhouse”) or *der misnágdisher mínyen* (“the



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Synim (Belarus)



Shat (Šeta, Lithuania)



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Klesk (Belarus)

misnagdic quorum”) and occasionally even as *der litvisher minyan* (“the Lithuanian quorum”), in places where *litvish* came, after the late eighteenth century Hasidic-Misnagdic split, to be used to signify the concept “Misnagdic.”

Like the proverbial world of snow to the Eskimos, the complex of Lithuanian Jewish prayerhouse types and details, and all their folklore, could easily fill a weighty tome. It is important to remember that to traditional Lithuanian Jewish civilization, each prayerhouse had a *local* beloved name that stuck, as was the case for people. For example, of the nine Jewish prayerhouses in prewar Glubok (now Hlybokaje in northwestern Belarus), one was known as *di grine shul* (“the green synagogue”) after the color it had *once* been painted.



Sejny (Sejny, Poland): The White Synagogue, now home to the Borderland Center (for multiculturalism in East-Central Europe).



Svintyain (Šventionys, Lithuania): *Der alter bismeshel* (The Old Studyhouse), which stood near *Der niter bismeshel* (The New Studyhouse), which was itself centuries old.

Another was called *der béyker* (the early risers’ prayerhouse for workers who had to leave to work at daybreak; it takes its name from the Lithuanian pronunciation, *béyker*, of the Hebrew word for “morning” which is *bóyker* in standard pronunciation, Israeli Hebrew *bóker*).

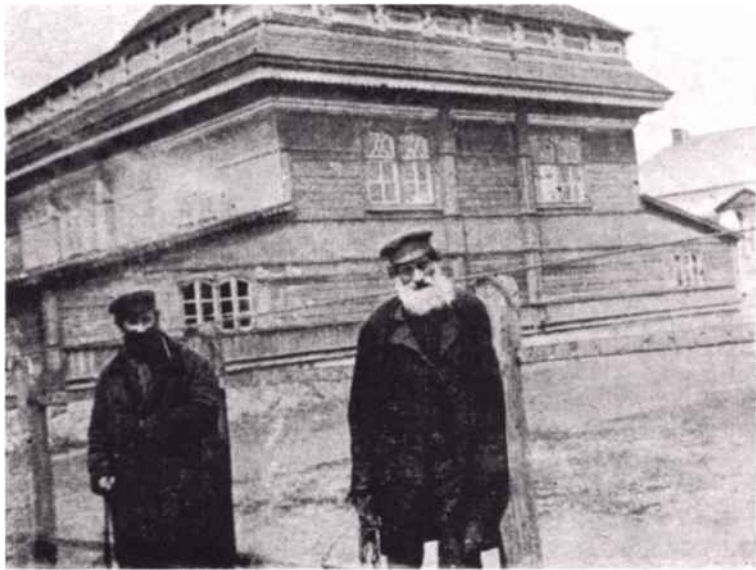
The vast majority of prayer and studyhouses were destroyed during the Nazi occupation, and many others fell victim to Soviet state destruction. Some buildings were Sovietized beyond recognition. Still, one can come across many former Lithuanian Jewish prayer and study houses in Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, and northeastern Poland.

It is not accurate to lump them all together as “synagogues.” For the civilization that built these structures for prayer and study, a *shul* was a *shul*, a *bismédresh* was a *bismédresh*, and a *kloyz* was a *kloyz*. . .



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Suwałk (Suwalki, Poland)



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Vilkovišk (Vilkaviškis, Lithuania)

Prayerhouse Interiors

Certain features were common to the interiors of nearly all Lithuanian Jewish prayerhouses.

The *pólish*

You enter into a large vestibule or entrance hall that is in effect a separate room, open to men and women alike, and that sometimes serves as a place to meet. This area is called the *pólish*, a word reserved for prayerhouses. The vestibule to even the grandest private home is a *fires*, not a *pólish*.

The *shtot* and its location within the prayerhouse

Shtot, which means “city” in everyday usage, has a special meaning in the Lithuanian Yiddish prayerhouse vocabulary. Sometimes translated “pew,” it refers to a seat and the bookstand in front of it (which sometimes has a locked little cabinet for a personal *tális* or prayershawl, prayerbook and other items). Some regulars have their very own *shtot*. The most prestigious place for a *shtot* was near the eastern wall (traditionally facing Jerusalem, even though the geographic Jerusalem is more south than east from Lithuania). The eastern wall (*mizrekh-vant* in Yiddish) is where the ark with the Torahs is located, hence its sanctity and prestige. The opposite, or western wall (*mayrev-vant*) is often at the back of the prayerhouse. In a typical *bismédresh*, it is where the heating stove is situated. That was often where wandering visitors spent the night exchanging tales of the fantastic.

The *bima*

In the main prayer hall, the *bima* (Yiddish *bíme*) or reader’s platform, generally square, stands right in the middle, not up front like a stage extending from the ark (as is the case in most western synagogues). The *bima* takes the



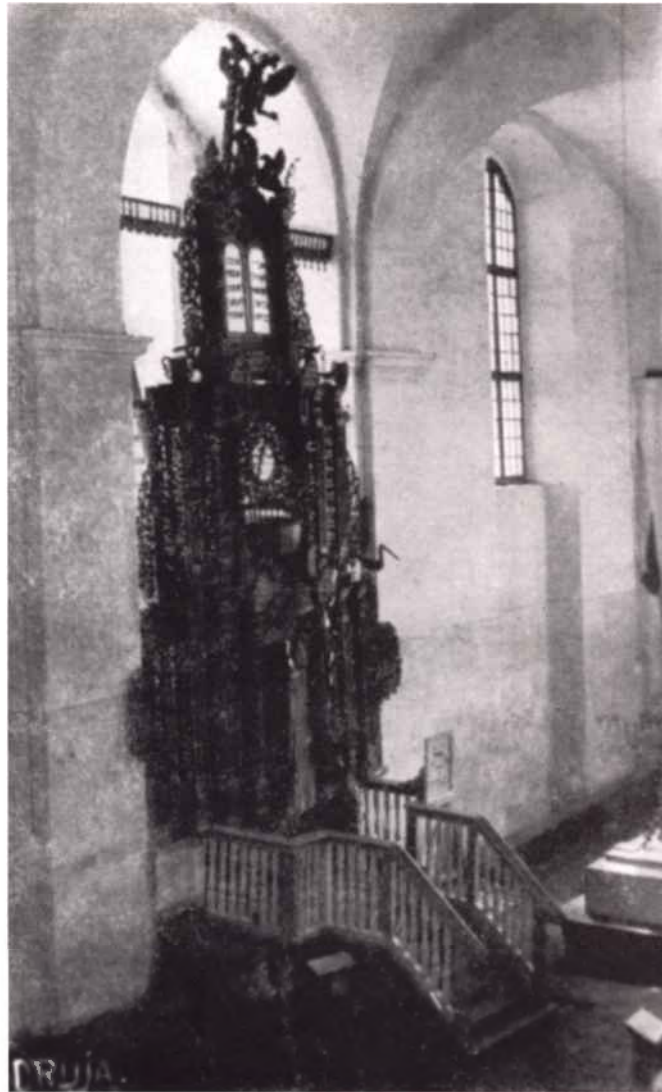
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The bima in
Vshimets (Vishytis,
Lithuania)

form of a raised area with some steps enclosed by wood railings, on which stands a reader's desk that has to be large enough to accommodate the unrolled Scroll of the Torah. Very often the bima has an ornamental little roof.

The ark

The sacred ark (Lithuanian Yiddish *orn-kéydes*, standard *orn-kóydes*, modern Hebrew *arón ha-kódes*). It is very sacred, housing the Torahs, or parchment scrolls of the Five Books of Moses.



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The ark in Druya (now in Belarus)

This ark, in the *grejse shul* (great synagogue) of Druya (Yiddish *Drúye*, now Druya, Belarus), was famous for its magnificence, which is not fully evident from the surviving photographs. The synagogue itself was built thanks to a gift from Christians, the famous Polish-Lithuanian Sapieha family, in the seventeenth century. They enabled construction of both the synagogue and the Catholic church as gifts to the people of Druya.

The Ten Commandments

An engraving or painting of an abbreviated form of the Ten Commandments (usually giving the first key word or two of each of them), in the traditional shape of the tablets of the law which tradition says Moses brought down from Mount Sinai, is a frequent adornment on or near the sacred ark of the Torah. This is simply known as *di lúkhes* (“the tablets”) in Yiddish, deriving from the Hebrew *shney lukhoyt ha-brís* (“the two tablets of the covenant”).

The Torah scroll

The scroll with the handwritten text of the Five Books of Moses (The Torah or Pentateuch) is the most sacred object in a Jewish prayerhouse. It is known as the *seyfer-Tóyre* in Lithuanian Yiddish (*seyfer-Tóyre* in standard Yiddish, and *sefer Torah* in common English usage). Many prayerhouses have more than one.

Each Torah scroll is written and constructed over many years by a highly learned specialized scribe who must wear the traditional *talis* (prayer shawl) and *tfiln* (phylacteries) when at work. When ancient copies of certain books of the Bible were discovered among the Dead Sea scrolls in the mid twentieth century, scholars marveled at how meticulously accurate the Jewish scribes (*sófrim*) had been over thousands of years. Down to the most minute issues of spacing, size of letters in certain words, decorations of certain letters and so forth, it must be a perfect hand-cra-



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Białystok

The Ten Commandments at Uzlián

(Uzliány, Belarus)

Smaller inscriptions above and below

indicate that the ark and ten commandments

were completed in [5]521 (= 1761) by Dos

ben Azriel and his son Yankev (Jacob).

ated reproduction. It may not contain the vowel and cantillation marks (which are “only” between one and two thousand years old) of printed Bibles used for regular study. The Torah is written with a fine goose quill on sections of leather or parchment skin sewn together with dried tendons.

One of these scrolls is removed and taken to the reader’s desk three times a week: at the main Sabbath morning service when the whole weekly portion (*párshe* or *sédre*) is read, and on Mondays and Thursdays when a section of the coming Sabbath’s portion is read during the weekday morning (*shákhris*) service. From this comes the Yiddish phrase *yedn móntik un dónershtik* (“every Monday and Thursday”) in the sense of “very frequently” or “all the time.” The ark is also opened, without the Torah scroll being removed, at specified points during various prayer services.

The Torah scroll is rolled around two *etz-chaims* (“trees of life”) which are topped by little *kréynen* (usually metal crowns), and covered with a *méntele* (“little coat” or mantle). Lithuanian Yiddish distinguishes between the Torah’s *méntele* and the everyday diminutive of the word for “outer garment” or “coat” (*mantl*) which is *mántele*.



This Torah (at left) has an embroidered *méntele* and the two letters *kof* and *tof* standing for *kosef Tóre* (Kether Torah, “the crown of Torah”). Underneath is the reader’s pointer known as the *yad* (literally “hand”).



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection
Białystok

This is a section of the Torah scroll from Shadov (Seduva, Lithuania), which was thought to be the oldest in all Lithuania. This surviving photograph shows only the left hand *etz-chaim* and the left part of the portion opened. Like all Hebrew (and Yiddish) texts, it reads from right to left.

Elijah's chair

Elijah's chair (*Kisey Eylióhu*) is a special chair “kept in waiting” for *Eylióhu ha-Nóvi* (Elijah the Prophet), whose coming will, in Jewish tradition, herald that of Messiah. In Jewish folklore, Elijah often appears disguised as a beggar to test people's goodheartedness.

This ornamental chair was a beloved feature of the prayerhouse in Yúrberik (Jurbarkas, Lithuania). It had a practical, ritual purpose too. It is placed to the right of the *sándik* (a kind of “godfather”), unoccupied, during the circumcision ceremony.

The folks in Yurberik, like those in any other shtetl, hoped in their heart of hearts that Elijah would choose their town to herald the coming of Messiah, who might even himself ride through its main street on his donkey one day, on his way to Jerusalem. . .

The text engraved on the chair's back here includes the circumcision blessing invoking Abraham's covenant (Genesis 17: 11—12), by which the eight-day old child is joined to the covenant. In this way, the chair links the origins of the Jewish people in the time of Abraham (*Avróm Ovínu*, “our father Abraham”) to the circumcision (*bris*) of an eight day old boy in the present, with the coming of Messiah (*Meshíekh*) at the end of days. The chair thereby becomes a kind of symbol of eternity.

The women's section

The women's section of the prayerhouse (*étras nóshim* “women's section” or *váyber-shul* “women's synagogue”). In the traditional prayerhouse, men and women sit (or stand, depending on the prayer) in separate sections but listening to and watching the same “action” on the central bima or up front at the ark. Nevertheless, many women's prayers, especially on the major holi-



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Elijah's Chair in
Yurberik (Jurbarkas,
Lithuania)



In this women's balcony in Slonim, the rounded ceiling gives a prayerhouse atmosphere. Windows at the right are for sunlight. Those at the left face down onto the main area of the synagogue.

days, had a prayer leader, called a *firzogerke* or *firzogerin* (“the woman who says it first”) who led the women in prayer. In theory men and women prayed the same prayers, but in practice, men usually read the original Hebrew or Aramaic text, and women combined certain well-known sections in the original with a special Yiddish translation written in a highly specific, hallowed kind of archaizing sacred Yiddish known as *hri-taytsh* (which originally meant simply “translation of the Hebrew”).



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection
Białystok

Mólév

Ceiling and wall painting

Many prayerhouses in Lithuania had traditional motifs painted onto ceilings and walls. Paintings were done on wood as often as on plaster (as in the classic fresco). In bigger towns and cities, these were often carried out to a high professional standard, as in this prayerhouse in Mólév (Moblév or Mogilov, Belarus).

Sometimes, a small shtetl would also invest heavily in the beauty of its *shul* (see the case of Ólkenik on the pages following). But often the work was home-grown and a sample of folk art. One famous case is the wooden prayerhouse in Pokróy (Pakruojis, Lithuania).

Here the lion is painted onto the inside boards of the structure itself, with a quote from the Prophet Amos, which gives the folk art a higher, reli-



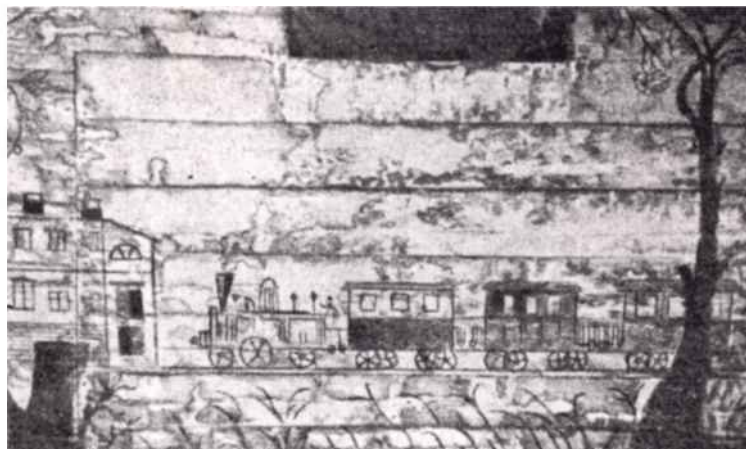
Tomasz Wisniewski Collection
Białystok

Wall painting in the famous
prayerhouse in Pokróy
now Pakrojis, Lithuania

gious meaning. Using the lion as an image for the Almighty, the prophet asks: “The lion hath roared, who will not fear?” (Amos 3: 8).

Another wall had a very rare image of a modern invention — a train. It is shown pulling into Pokróy’s new train station, which the synagogue’s worshippers were celebrating with all the townspeople.

Rare among wooden synagogues, this one in Pokróy still stands, though an abandoned haunting ruin. In the spring of 2009 it was partly burned down by vandals.



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Białystok

Wall painting in the wooden synagogue in Pokróy
celebrating the town's newly built train station (at left)

The famous prayerhouse in Olkenik

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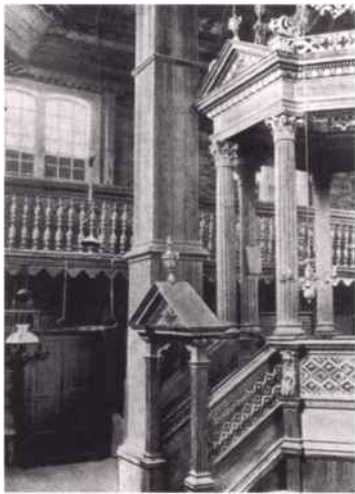
The famous wooden
synagogue in Olkenik

Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Białystok

The wooden synagogue of Ólkenik (now Valkininkai, Lithuania) was famous throughout Lithuania for its beauty, intricate design and ornamentation. It was rebuilt in 1801 by two brothers, Mordechai and Gershon. Its sacred ark featured a “mechanical calendar” that gave details on dates and holidays (according to the ancient lunar Hebrew calendar), all the way to the end of the sixth millennium. If not for the Holocaust, it would have had some time yet to run — until the Hebrew year 6000, which corresponds with the general calendar’s 2239 and 2240.

The “Olkenik calendar” was invented by one Yankev ben Shleyme of Raséyn (now Rasciniai).

The famous “ark of Olkenik” had engravings of flowers, deer, doves and lions, and a spectacular *liyósn* (leviathan) with its tail in its mouth; lions holding the “crown of the Torah”; depictions of Mount Sinai; blessings of the priests; and much more. To its right, on the *mízkh-vant* (the eastern wall), were the thirteen principles of Talmudic exegesis formulated by Rabbi



The bima (reading platform)



The bima (detail)



The ark

Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Białystok

Yishmoel (in the first half of the second century AD; see p. 30); the thirteen principles of Jewish faith promulgated by Maimonides (in the late twelfth century); as well as kabbalistic formulas which were believed to protect the wood structure from fire. Indeed, it remained unscathed during a number of major town-wide conflagrations in the nineteenth century.

The wood for the Olkenik *shul* had been donated by the town’s nobleman, Granowsky. The designers could not include a picture of him, because Jewish tradition doesn’t allow for pictures of people in synagogues. So instead, a huge picture of his palace was painted as a fresco on the ceiling.

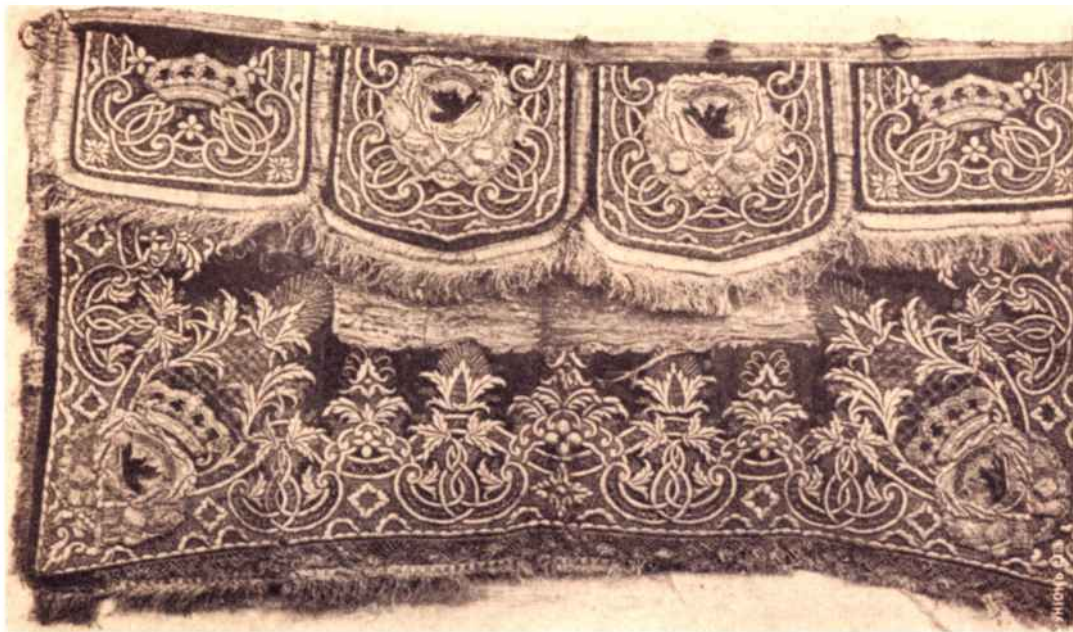
In 1812, Napoleon passed through Olkenik. He was so inspired by the synagogue’s beauty that he felt he couldn’t move on without leaving a gift that would remain there for generations. He had the gilded cover of his saddle reworked into a *paróykhes* (traditional hanging curtain over the doors of the ark)



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The ark (detail)

that had four golden crowns, the name Napoleon and the words GLORIA PATRI. In czarist times, the *paróykhes* with the traces of Napoleon was usually kept hidden. Between the wars, Olkenik, with a population of two hundred Jewish and two hundred Gentile families, was in the Polish Republic.



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Napoleon's gift to the synagogue in 1812

Three Personalities of 19th Century Jewish Vilna

Dveyre-Ester

Virtually every town with a Jewish population had at least one *gmiles-khésed* (“merciful works”), an organization to help poor people, principally through interest-free loans and small donations. Vilna had many. The best known was the central *Tsdóko gdéylo* (“great charity”) centered in the courtyard of the Great Synagogue.

For many years, however, the most beloved was the charity established in 1862 by a remarkable woman, known to Vilna Jews as Dvéyre-Éster (Deborah-Esther). She was born in Vilna in 1817, the daughter of a poor scholar, Sholem, and got married at a young age to Meyshe-Idl Helfer, a poor sawyer. The childless couple’s income was supplemented by Dveyre-Ester’s baking. She would sell her baked goods where she could. And she found her “other” lifelong calling at an early age — collecting and distributing charity.

For decades, Dveyre-Ester Helfer’s reputation for integrity and wisdom was second to none in town. That her married name was Helfer (Yiddish for “helper”) suited the new legend superbly. When she told of a misfortune that had befallen someone, people knew that not a word was exaggerated. Whether a wagoner’s horse fell sick, or a scholar needed a book to continue studying, or a sick person needed a certain medicine, “it was a case for Dveyre-Esther.” She was known to specialize in “organizing” sums needed to put people back on the path to independence. People in trouble would run through the streets looking for Dveyre-Ester.



Leizer Ram Collection

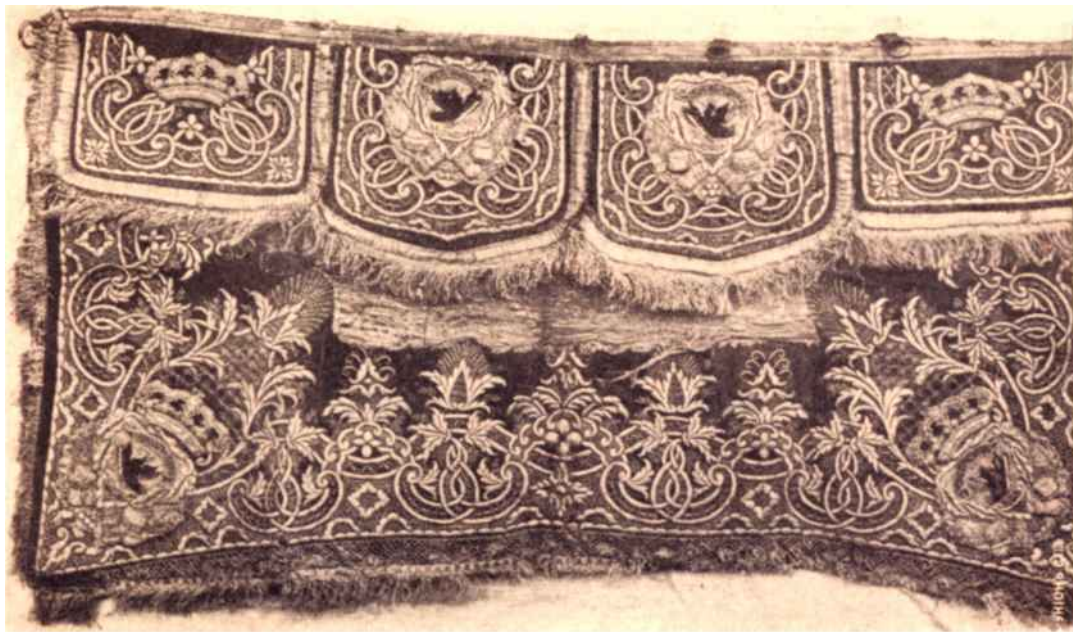
The portrait of Dveyre-Ester Helfer
that hung in many Vilna homes.



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

The ark (detail)

that had four golden crowns, the name Napoleon and the words GLORIA PATRI. In czarist times, the *paróykhes* with the traces of Napoleon was usually kept hidden. Between the wars, Olkenik, with a population of two hundred Jewish and two hundred Gentile families, was in the Polish Republic.



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Napoleon's gift to the synagogue in 1812

In her own poor garments she had sewn many pockets, each for a different “fund.” One for poor brides, one for sick people, one for loans to peddlers. People knew that their donation, no matter how small, would go exactly for the cause intended.

Dveyre-Ester was also the driving force behind the collective decision of a little *kloyz* (prayerhouse) to dedicate itself to helping the needy. After raising the funds for this synagogue to buy its own premises, in the courtyard known as *Reb Mayle’s heyf*, the congregation went under different formal names, including *Pikúekh nefóshes* (“Saving of People”) and *Éyzer dálim* (“Help for the Poor”). Nevertheless, it became known throughout Vilna simply as *Dveyre-Ester’s kloyz*. And, when *Vilner* gave something a name, that was what it was to be called for keeps.

Dveyre-Ester also became something of a saint figure. She acquired a reputation for “blessings that work.” The poor always asked her for a special blessing along with every bit of money they would take from her hand. She was also known for a phenomenal memory for a huge number of names, addresses, needs and sums. When she felt it beginning to fade in old age, she taught herself to write (though she could read from childhood).



The *éyel* (traditional mausoleum) built over Dveyre-Ester’s grave in Vilna

When Dveyre-Ester died at the age of 90 in 1907, the Jews of Vilna built her an *éyel* (Standard Yiddish *óyel* or *óyhel*, Hebrew *óhel*) a mausoleum, of the kind usually reserved for great rabbinic scholars, at her gravesite. People would come and leave notes inside, just as they did at the tombs of the greatest rabbis and scholars.

The little synagogue named for her erected a large marble slab with a complicated Hebrew poem about this remarkable woman. Up to the Holocaust, it was one of the sights to see in town.

And thousands of Vilna Jews put up a poster with her portrait in their homes, right alongside the one of the Gaon of Vilna.



Leyzer Ran Collection

Dveyre (Deborah) Romm

Dveyre Romm

The fabled Romms were Lithuania's "first family of Jewish publishing" from 1788, when the bookdealer Boruch Romm of Grodna published the first Jewish book to appear in Lithuania (see p. 141), and until 1940, when the Soviets nationalized the firm and converted it to their own uses. The early books were published in Grodna, then Grodna and Vilna, and finally, in the days of Boruch's son, Menachem-Man Romm, in Vilna alone where the firm was becoming more and more established in the nineteenth century. The Romms played a major role in the publication of the Talmud, producing the *Vilner shas* (Vilna Talmud) that has remained standard to this day, and is often photomechanically reprinted in Israel and America. They also participated in enabling the rise

of both modern Hebrew and modern Yiddish literature by publishing (and advertising) early seminal works in both modernized mediums.

The best known Romm of the nineteenth century was originally not a Romm at all. She was Dveyre (Deborah) Harkavy, a scion of the famed Harkavys of Naváredok (Novogrudok, now Navahrudak, Belarus), a family that produced a number of leading scholars, including the great Yiddish lexicographer Alexander Harkavy (1863—1939). Dveyre, the daughter of Rabbi Yeysef-Betsalel Harkavy, was married, in a conventional inter-city match between two illustrious families, to Dovid Romm. The then head of the firm, Chaim-Yankev, died in 1858, leaving Dovid as his replacement. Dovid Romm died suddenly in 1860, and the firm's imminent collapse was widely predicted. But his widow Dveyre took command, and renamed the firm (in 1863) *Ho-almóno v'ho-ákhim Rom* ("The Widow and Brothers Romm"). That imprint has been familiar to Talmud students and to readers of Yiddish and Hebrew ever since. The "widow Romm" had extraordinary business acumen combined with a rabbinic sense of urgency about accuracy in the publication of Talmudic texts. She hired the best writers, proofreaders and advisors of the day and saw off many challenges to her authority, always emerging victorious from family feuds. Meanwhile, her international stature was growing, having the only Jewish printing firm in history to be named for a woman director, and one that went on to shape the Jewish book market for decades. She lived until the end of 1903. Three of her sons emigrated to New York.

Matisyohu Strashun

Matisyóhu Strashún (1819—1885) was perhaps as close as one could get to “Vilna Jewish royalty” in the nineteenth century. His father, Rabbi Shmuel Strashun (1794—1872), known as “the Rashásh” or “Shmuel Zaskovitzer”, was a brilliant Talmudic commentator who put the Gaon’s critical and text-reconstructing methodology to constant use. The elder Strashun was also a personal pupil of the great Avrom Danzig (1748—1820), author of the classic *Kháye-Ódom* (*Chayei Adam*), a brief compendium of the Jewish laws made simple for everyone. It appeared many times in both Hebrew and Yiddish.

The Strashuns were related by marriage to the Romms, Harkavys and Eliasbergs, all top names in Vilna Jewish “high society.”

Matisyohu Strashun’s greatest “pedigree” was not one of blood however. It was rather in the old Jewish spirit of “students of students” forming an unbroken chain of scholarship that is carried forward by direct, human transmission through successive “generations” of pupils. Matisyohu (Mátes for short) studied with two of the most prominent disciples of the Gaon of Vilna — Chaim of Valozhin and Menashe Ilyer. He therefore had the luster of being “a student of a student of the Gaon of Vilna.”

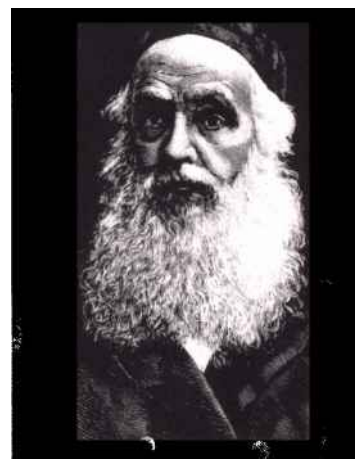
The degree to which this man was trusted is evident from the variety of those who trusted him. Within the Jewish community, he was appointed head of the central charity organization, the *Tsdóko gdéylo* (“Great Charity” of Vilna). The czarist authorities appointed him advisor to the state bank, and awarded him gold medals. And when two great rabbis had a dispute over a point of astronomy relevant to the Jewish calendar, they agreed to submit their dispute to him for final arbitration. This goes to another aspect of Matisyohu Strashun’s fame. He knew Greek and Latin in addition to German, Polish and Russian, and was well studied in a number of secular fields. His own publications were many, short, and often appeared under entertaining, mystifying pseudonyms. He also wrote traditional commentaries. The Strashun home became the foremost Jewish literary and intellectual *salon* in town, where believers and non-believers, Jews and Christians, all felt welcome and free to discuss every kind of issue in an atmosphere of tolerance, tranquility and mutual respect. A street was named for him in the interwar Polish period — Strashuna. It is today’s Žemaitijos gatvė, and some hope it will one day be renamed for Matisyohu Strashun. The street was destined, tragically, to be the “ground zero” of the Vilna Ghetto uprising in September 1943.

Strashun's greatest claim to fame was his magnificent library. He used his wealth (family wealth as well as the resources of his own successful ventures) to assemble the best Jewish library Vilna or Lithuania had ever seen. During his lifetime, he personally lent many volumes to both traditional and modern scholars, becoming a one-person center for education and research.

He was childless, and left all seven thousand or so volumes from his library, in effect, to the people of Vilna and to scholars from everywhere who visited. The library opened formally in 1893, and was moved to its purpose-built home in the *Vilner Shul-heyf* in 1902 (see p. 118), where it became a center for religious as well as secular learning, right in the shadow of the Great Synagogue of Vilna. Subsequent gifts brought the collection to around forty thousand.

During the Holocaust, many of the books were sent by the Nazis to Frankfurt. After the war they were distributed to leading Jewish libraries in the United States and Israel. Part of the collection found its way to the recreated Yivo in America, the world's central institution for East European Jewish studies. The Yivo rededicated its Strashun collection in 2002, launched by a work on Strashun edited by Y. A. Taub (see bibliography at the end of this volume) and a major international exhibition by Yivo librarian Aviva Astrinsky and her staff. A number of facsimiles in this volume, so marked, come from Matisyohu Strashun's Vilna library.

In Lithuania, the Judaica Section at the bibliographic division of the National Library in Vilnius is also named for Matisyohu Strashun. It has been meticulously nurtured under the leadership of Fira Bramson and Dr. Larisa Lempertienė.



Yivo

Matisyohu Strashun

The *shtetl*



Brushmakers in
Vilkošishik (now
Vilkavėškis, Lithuania)

Few concepts have been so misunderstood in Jewish history as the *shtetl*, the East European townlet where a sizable proportion of the population was Jewish. Many Jews in the west whose forebears came from a *shtetl* have a mental image of some kind of “ghetto.” When they visit their ancestral hometowns, they are not infrequently shocked to discover ample sized houses with Chagall-like assymetries and large ovens, set in huge orchards, amidst a handful of streets and a charming town square, surrounded by forests and fields on all sides. Lithuanian *shtetlakh* (the Yiddish plural of *shtetl*) are generally on flatland and very often on the banks of rivers, streams and lakes.



Aniksh (Ankšėiai, Lithuania)



Yurberik (now
Jurbarkas, Lithuania)

From the viewpoint of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe, the shtetl is perhaps best conceived as a microcosm of a society, which has its own *shúl-heyf*, at least one prayerhouse (usually more, no matter how small the whole place is), a traditional *kheyder* (school), more modern schools (since the late nineteenth or earlier twentieth century), and a cemetery. Its people include a rabbi, prayerhouse staff, teacher, butcher, baker, and an array of tradespeople and small shopkeepers, characters and eccentrics.

Riding through Lithuania or Belarus, it is not too difficult even today to get the feel of which town was a shtetl and which was not. A shtetl generally has a town square with a church. Settlements without these two features were

Radin (now
Radun, Belarus)



Abrashke Rogovsky (Tel Aviv)



Tomasz Wisniewski
Collection Białystok

Lide (now Lida, Belarus)



Ziske Shapiro
(Podbródz)

Listening to a lesson on a
chapter of Psalms

Training future shoemakers
in Vilkomir (now
Ukmergė, Lithuania)



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok



Menke Katz Collection

The amateur drama society prepares
for a play in Lintup (now Lintup,
Belarus)

called a *dorf* or *yishev* (“hamlet” or “settlement”). There were some Jews, called *yishúvnikes* who lived in the hamlets, but most had been expelled by various czarist edicts in the nineteenth century, and they were in any case few and far between compared to the Jewish population of a shtetl, which often amounted to a majority of the inhabitants.

The Jews of a shtetl took great pride in that shtetl, just as if it were a great city. In fact, shtetl folk often called their own shtetl a *shtot* (“city”), reserving the word *shtetl* for the town down the road. But when talking of their town lovingly, or even with a touch of affectionate self-satire, they might well use the second Yiddish diminutive *shtétele* (literally “very small town”) to refer to it.



Podbródz (now Pabradė, Lithuania)



Kraslávke (now Kraslava, Latvia)



Iyve (now Ijė, Belarus)

Tomasz Wisniewski
Collection Bialystok



Leyzer Ran Collection

Walking down the street



Leyzer Ran Collection

Woman on bicycle



Avremke Kaplan (Zhetl)

Women in holding the salt in the 19th century (Zhetl)



Street in the 19th century (Zhetl)



Building in the 19th century



Market in the 19th century (Zhetl)

Very many *shtetlakh* are famous in Lithuanian Jewish culture because of some famous person or people who come from there. To cite some well-known examples, there are the rabbis Yisroel of Salánt and Chaim of Valozhin; the artists Chagall of Lyozna and Soutine of Smilovitch; Yiddish writers Mendele of Kapúle, Reyzen of Kóydenov and Leivick of Ihúmen; Hebrew author Smolenskin of Nastershín and language reviver Ben Yehuda of Luzhik; Israeli leaders such as Weizmann of Mótele and Peres of Vísheve.

This can be extended and can make for a very long list. It indicates the very high level of culture of the shtetl, and that brings us to the crux. The shtetl is a small microcosmic society where thousands of years of texts in a highly



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Telz (now Telšiai, Lithuania)



Menke Katz Collection

"Shia the Blinker," a well known beggar in Svintsyán (now Švenčionys, Lithuania)

Svintsyán in the winter



Menke Katz Collection



Menke Katz Collection

Svir (now in Belarus), viewed from Mount Svir,
a hill built by Napoleon's forces



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection
Bialystok

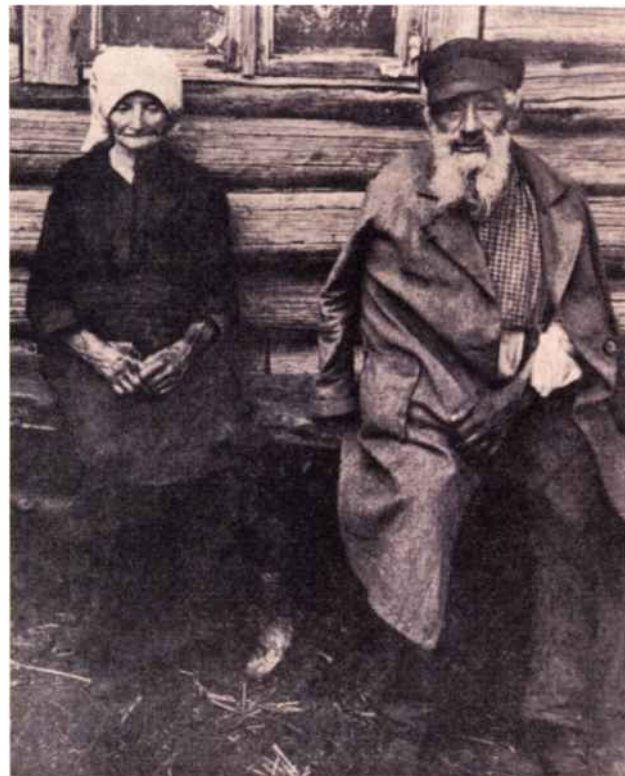
Glubok (now Hlybokaje, Belarus)

literate society, are very much alive, right in the midst of the orchards, rivers and forests. This is a juxtaposition of a complex and ancient culture based on the written word with the naked unurbanized world of nature. In a Lithuanian shtetl a hundred years ago, people used the ancient Hebrew lunar calendar to discuss time, and came up with ever new Yiddish witticisms about Biblical and Talmudic and other Jewish historical personalities, as if they too were neighbors in the shtetl.

But the shtetl was not a place where Jews had only to do with themselves. It was also a microcosm of a multicultural society, not of course in the modern sense of studying a diversity of cultures, but in the perhaps deeper everyday sense of peoples with very different cultures speaking the colloquial form of one another's languages to communicate. In Lithuania particularly, there had been an overall excellent record of intercommunity relations spanning more than six centuries.

That is not to say that the shtetl did not have its drawbacks. Poverty, plagues, fires, wars, disputes and anti-Jewish government policies (whether local or national in any given period) took their toll. It is a delicately nuanced history that is all too often subject to the extremes of romantization or negation.

Salók (now Sabkas, Lithuania)



Ashkenazic trilingualism survives intact

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In the opening chapters of this book, there was a brief summary of Ashkenazic Jewish trilingualism (Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic) with an accompanying chart (see p. 44). That trilingualism, that was born in Ashkenaz around a thousand years ago, was alive and well in Eastern Europe right up to the Holocaust. Its most profound expressions came in the creativity of new works in all three languages, albeit with a much expanded repertoire for Yiddish and also Hebrew. Moreover, all three languages appeared on the same page of many traditional texts. This page is from a Vilna edition of the Book of Isaiah (1860). It is the first page of the book. The larger ornamental box marks the start of the original Hebrew. The smaller box to the right marks the Aramaic translation. Both these Biblical texts are in square Hebrew characters. Then come the rabbinic commentaries in the traditional Rashi font. The Yiddish translation, in two columns spanning the width of the page, is at the bottom.



First page of the Book of Isaiah (Vilna 1860) in Hebrew,

Aramaic and Yiddish

Menke Katz Collection

Individualists and Modernists

One of the much-trumpeted character features of the proverbial Litvak of Yiddish folklore is his or her stubbornness, hence the (decidedly non-Litvak) Yiddish epithet *an áynghesparter Litvak* (“an obstinate Litvak”). In modern Yiddish literature, the trait is best known from *Oyb nisht nokh hekher* (“If not Higher Still”), a classic story by the Polish Yiddish master Y. L. Peretz (1852—1915). The Litvak in this story, an anti-Hasidic Misnaged, is determined to find out where the Hasidic rebbe of a certain town down south really goes each year when his Hasidim believe he goes up to heaven to intercede on their behalf. The Litvak, determined to get to the bottom of things, goes down south to the rebbe’s town, and manages to hide himself under the rebbe’s bed and to follow him to his true destination. . .

There were certainly many Litvaks who sought to master some branch of knowledge not included in the traditional rabbinic repertoire long before such things came into vogue for Ashkenazic Jewry. A leading Yiddish cultural historian, Jacob Shatzky (1893—1956), has demonstrated that in the reality of earlier centuries, the

ticket to wider knowledge was the one secular field “slightly” more open to Jews (especially for those prepared to travel) — medicine. Shatzky saw medical studies as a sort of “launch pad” for Litvaks who would branch out into other scholarly fields, whether Jewish or general.

From the sixteenth century onward, a new interest in ancient Hebrew was rising among Christians in Lithuania, primarily among the Calvinists. In the school founded in Slutsk by the Radziwills in 1617, Hebrew was taught three hours a week. The Radziwills were an important and princely family whose members played visible roles in the history of Lithuania and Poland, particularly in the Vilna region. The Calvinists generally opposed political union with Poland in the sixteenth century, seeking to spiritually link Lithuania with protestant Sweden. Many of their descendants, however, returned to Catholicism in later generations.

The links between various Protestant leaders in Lithuania and individual learned Jews became a magnet for attacks from various quarters, not least the Catholic Church, which accused

Protestantism of being a sort of “Jewish Christianity.” At the same time, Jews with intellectual links to Christian clergy were sometimes themselves suspect in some rabbinic circles. In those years, the entire enterprise was intellectually daring for participants from both religions.

Within Jewish culture, it was daring in a second, “internal” way. For all its vast “library” of texts, traditional Ashkenazic learning did not stress research into most of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), concentrating instead on the “Ashkenazic canon,” which consisted primarily of the Five Books of Moses (the Torah or Pentateuch), early Prophets, Psalms, and portions of Prophets that happened to be among the weekly supplementary Sabbath readings after the weekly portion of the Torah.

The Christian theologian Szymon Budni (1530s—1593) was a sectarian leader of the anti-Trinitarian branch of Lithuanian-Polish Protestantism. He stressed the need for profound knowledge of Biblical Hebrew, and he translated the Hebrew Bible into Polish, consulting Jewish scholars in the process. He respected Mosaic law, and stressed the very human nature of Jesus. He was a highly original and controversial figure who laid the groundwork for Christian-Jewish contacts at the clerical and intellectual levels, contacts that would create a “micro environment” that lasted for many years.

The Jewish-Protestant mini-dialogue led some foreign Jewish intellectuals to actually come to Lithuania. The first and most famous, who lived from 1591 to 1655, was, surely enough, a medic.

It is characteristic of people who straddle two cultures to have two names. In traditional rabbinic circles, especially those leaning to the mystical ideas of the Kabbalah, he is *Yósher mi-Kándye* (Yosher from Kandia = Crete), the name being a classic style acronym derived from his name and title: Yosef Shloyme Boyle (“Joseph Solomon the Doctor”). The usual practice of supplying a vowel and ultimate stress to acronyms ending in a consonant was apparently overruled here by the homophony (and identical spelling) of the acronym with the Ashkenazic Hebrew *yosher* (‘straight’, ‘upright’, ‘honest’). In Yiddish the word is rendered *yósher*. The acronymic of this Joseph Solomon therefore can also translate as “Mr. Honest of Crete” (a typical playful ambiguity in rabbinic lore). For the Christian world he was Joseph Solomon Delmedigo. He was a rabbi and Kabbalist in his traditionalist works, and a philosopher, mathematician and astronomer in his worldly endeavors. He wrote dozens of books.

A native of Crete, and son of its rabbi, he left at fifteen to study at Padua under Galileo. In Padua he also befriended Leone Modena, the eccentric “father of Hebrew autobiography.” His travels to Cairo, Constantinople, and other intellectual centers brought him into contact with Kabbalists, Karaites as well as Muslim scholars, and in Italy and elsewhere, with Christian intellectuals. He was an ardent follower of Copernican astronomy, and thought that Kabbalah might answer some of the conundrums of philosophy, but didn’t hesitate to criticize some Kabbalistic tenets.

In 1620, he was practicing medicine, in— Vilna, a “specialist” in treating the nobility, including Prince Radziwiłł. Weekdays he would make medical rounds in the area. On the Sabbath he would speak in the synagogue. Among the local Litvaks, he acquired a reputation for staying up all night immersed in his writing and studies.

After leaving Vilna, he went to Germany and then Amsterdam, and published one of his books for the first time in 1629. It is a scholarly reply to his erstwhile debating partner in Lithuania, the Karaite scholar Zerach ben Nathan (born 1578) of Trok (Troki, now Trakai), near Vilna (see p. 215). Zerach put to Delmedigo twelve major questions and seventy minor ones, covering everything from demons and amulets to Greek philosophy. True to rabbinic tradition, Delmedigo — Yosher of Kandyc — found a suitable Biblical passage for the naming of the book. It is Exodus 15: 27. “And they [the Children of Israel during their journey to the Promised Land] came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water, and seventy palm trees.” The book, called *Seyfer Eylim* (“The Book of Elim”), was published by Menashe ben Israel (1604—1657), who had established the first Hebrew printing press in Amsterdam in 1626. Menashe ben Israel is best known for persuading Oliver Cromwell (in 1655) to permit the return of Jews to England.

Delmedigo’s fame was launched by this book of replies to a Karaite scholar in Lithuania, and this helped put Lithuania on the international Jewish map of “modern scholars” who went beyond Talmudic studies. Engaging in dialogue and

debate with Karaite scholars was a popular activity for rabbinic personalities seeking a realm of ideas wider than the corpus available in normative Judaism of the day.

In those years, the first Jewish philosopher from Lithuania also emerged. He was Joseph the son of Isaac Segal, who left Lithuania and always signed himself *ish Lito* (“man of Lithuania”). His best known work, a critique of Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*, appeared in Prague in 1611, in which he pointed to contradictions within the *Guide*, while demonstrating that it is a work of genius. One of the philosophically high points of the young Litvak’s book (he is referred to as “young” on the title page) is his analysis of Maimonides’ attempt at a proof of the existence of a First Cause (God). The great Moravian rabbi, Yom-Tov Lipman Heller, known as “The *Toysfes Yontef*” after one of his great works, added his own comments to Joseph’s book, pointing out that it was this young fellow from Lithuania who taught him Jewish philosophy. Joseph published a second work around 1614, and then his life disappears from the known record. A “man of Lithuania” who left behind a major work on the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides.

Then came Jonathan ben Joseph of Ruzhán (Rúzhene, Ruzhenóy, now Ružany, Belarus). He lived in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. During a plague in his hometown in 1710 he took an oath, that if he would survive, he would dedicate his life to — astronomy. To widen his knowledge, he eventually moved to Germany (though virtually blind), where he befriended the

Christian Hebrew scholar and great bibliographer Johann Christoph Wolf (1683—1739) in Hamburg. He wrote some major works on traditional astronomy, fulfilling his youthful vow. One of them is a commentary on the laws of blessing the new moon. He was a child of his time, insofar as he believed that astronomy is vital to the understanding and prevention of plagues.

And so, with one and then with another inventive personality, Jewish *Lita* slowly but surely rose onto the map of various “non-Talmudic” Jewish intellectual pursuits.

Then came *di Páduer* — “the Paduans,” young Lithuanian scholars who found sponsorship, Jewish or non-Jewish, to study medicine in Padua and to return to practice in Lithuania. Between 1519 and 1721 around two hundred and thirty Jews from Italy and other parts of Europe (especially Germany, Poland and Lithuania) completed their medical qualifications at Padua.

A “Paduan” would usually sign a contract in which he would pledge to return as physician to the sponsoring family. The well-known Gordons of Vilna sent a number of their sons to study medicine in Padua between the late seventeenth and the mid eighteenth century (and this is one of the semi-legends accounting for the wide dispersion of the name “Gordon” among Lithuanian Jews). One of the best known, Yekusiel Gordon, went to study medicine but became a foremost disciple and defender of the great Italian Kabbalist Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707—1747). It was Gordon who announced to the world that Luzzatto was receiving communica-

tions from a heavenly *mágid* or preacher, and Luzzatto, in turn, proclaimed Gordon to be a reincarnation of a great heroic soul from among the ancients (Samson, to be precise).

The medical exodus was checked by the admission of Jews to the medical faculty at Vilna University in the late eighteenth century. One of them who passed his examinations at Vilna in 1798, Bernard Erlich, became physician in Vilkomir (now Ukmergė, Lithuania).

Vilna University’s new policy even attracted Jews from abroad. One, Isaiah Jacob Frank of Berlin, had his medical dissertation published in Vilna in 1793. The thesis, in Latin, is considered to be one of the first serious medical works to be published in Lithuania.

Times changed, and there came a day when individualists among the Litvaks seeking new intellectual prospects could find “soul brothers” a way “down the road” in Germany. The geographic proximity of Lithuania to Germany was felt most at the westernmost reaches where *Lita* “fades into” German-Jewish lands, in the Königsberg and Memel (now Klaipėda) areas of “Lithuania Minor,” as well as in Courland (now western Latvia). But it was not geography alone that made for these links. A powerful new movement among Jews was underway in Germany which ultimately led to the appearance of the “modern Jew” throughout Europe and beyond. He or she is culturally assimilated (in language, dress, coiffure, daily pursuits and overall world view), but “a Jew” in his or her consciousness and a personally selected degree of religious obser-

vance. One formulation has it that the goal of the original eighteenth century movement was to produce “good Germans of the Mosaic faith.”

That movement is sometimes called the “Berlin Enlightenment” or the German-Jewish *Haskalah* (Yiddish *haskóle*, Israeli Hebrew *haskalá*), a Hebrew word that takes its root from *séykhel* (“common sense” or “intelligence”) and is closely related to a verb meaning “to use one’s power of understanding to comprehend something or figure something out.” The person with this attribute (what grammarians call the “agentive”) is a *maskil* (Yiddish *máskl*, Israeli Hebrew *maskil*), or “one who solves something by the use of his understanding.” It occurs in the Hebrew Bible, often in the sense of “man of understanding.” If there is any one passage which the movement took for an encapsulation of its message, it would in all likelihood be: “God looked forth from heaven upon the children of people, to see if there were any man of understanding [*maskil*] that did seek after God” (Psalm 14: 2). The eighteenth century upshot of this was that God is not particularly interested in “blind believers” who reject rationalism and common sense.

Once there was a movement under way, the word *maskil* (plural *maskilim*) came to mean simply “an adherent of the new *Haskalah* movement,” *Haskalah* being an abstract noun from the same root. But the “punch” of the word “*Haskalah*” was doubled by it coming to be the Jewish version of the European *Enlightenment* which stressed the faculty of reason. The German word *Aufklärung* was used for both.

It is an apt name from the movement’s point of view, because at its heart lay the desire to do away with the “non-logical” premises of the traditional Ashkenazic milieu. Many of the “givens” of that society — from the belief in God’s giving of the Torah on Sinai to the infallibility of the generations of rabbinic interpretation to a host of associated traditions — were swiftly consigned to the status of ancient tribal folklore.

But this movement did not arise in a vacuum. During the centuries of west-to-east shift of traditional Ashkenazic culture, the remaining Jews in the Germanic speaking lands were becoming less and less “Ashkenazim” and more and more “German Jews.” Their Yiddish was deteriorating into “German with a Jewish accent” and they were becoming more competent not only in the German language but also assimilating to the culture of the German environment. In other words, the course of history had provided a “ripe audience” for such a movement, and history was to provide it with the other half of the equation — a great leader.

That leader was Moses Mendelssohn (1729—1786), a philosopher and scholar who was able to mix in the highest circles of German intellectual society. He is considered the “father” of the *Haskalah* in view of his writings and his influence upon a circle of followers each of whom went on to build the movement in various directions. These included the campaign to win acceptance for such “modernized” Jews in German society. Mendelssohn’s Berlin circle was sure that anti-Jewish feeling would be wiped out once the

Jewish minority in Germany embraced German culture.

The Berlin Haskalah sought to stamp out Yiddish, which was in part on the way out anyway in Germany, certainly as the language of a serious literature, because of the decline of Ashkenazic separateness, linguistic attrition and cultural assimilation. The Berlin Maskilim borrowed the word “Jargon” from the parlance of anti-Semitism, and called Yiddish “Jargon.” They stormed against it, calling it ugly, barbaric and an embarrassment to civil society. Although they believed in perfect standard German as the ideal for speaking and daily communication, they did believe in developing Hebrew for certain purposes. One of their achievements was the Hebrew periodical *Ha-Meassef* (“The Collector”), which appeared with interruptions between 1783 and 1811, the “classic period,” one might say, of the Berlin Haskalah. Mendelssohn had earlier produced several issues of a Hebrew work in 1750. Nevertheless, his main goal was the spread of standard German, and to this end he published his German translation of the Torah in the early 1780s; the language is pure German but the alphabet and orthographic conventions are Yiddish, this to enable the movement to gradually “wean” away from Yiddish those Jews who could not read any other alphabet.

The Maskilim of Berlin also reformed religion itself, coming up with a synagogue that resembled a church, right down to the organ. Mendelssohn could not philosophically make peace with the concept of divine revelation, insist-

ing that belief must come from reason, as implied by the very name of the movement.

Whatever one’s views on the weak and strong points of their ideas, the Maskilim succeeded in building new modern schools and in launching the field now known as “Judaic Studies.” It was called *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“Science of Judaism”), after the name of the society established in 1819 by the outstanding German-Jewish scholar Leopold Zunz (1794—1886). The idea was to research, systematize and teach the treasures of the Judaic heritage according to the methodologies not of the yeshiva but of the modern university and its various disciplines: philology, history, bibliography, musicology, and so forth.

The new movement may have come at a ripe time for German Jewry, but not for Eastern Europe, which by the late eighteenth century had a population of many millions of Yiddish speaking Jews. For the Berlin Maskilim, the “conversion” of East European Jewry, the berated *Ostjuden*, whom many German Jews considered to be primitive beings, became the hot challenge of the day.

The first impact of the Haskalah was felt not in Lithuania, but in Galicia, the former Little Poland which passed to the Habsburgs in the course of the late eighteenth century Partitions of Poland (and beyond). German language and culture were in any case strong in the Austro-Hungarian region, and Haskalah ideas had their first major “Eastern impact” there. The title of “father of the East European Haskalah” is usually bestowed upon Isaac Ber Levinsohn (1788—1860), a

Ukrainian Jew who moved to Galicia, and was active in “both new divisions” of East European Jewry, the conceptual “half” that fell to the Habsburgs, and the “half” that became part of the expanded Russian Empire. To many Jews he was plain and simple a traitor for collaborating closely with the czarist authorities on limiting the number of Hebrew printing presses to three and censoring imported Hebrew books. His defenders point out that these concessions gave him leverage to campaign against other czarist excesses against the Jews (especially regarding long military service).

His major work, which in a sense launched the East European Haskalah as a movement, was his *Teudo b'Yisraél* (*Teudá be-Yisraél*; roughly “Testimony unto the People of Israel”). Because of all his enemies in his usual abodes, he had to publish the book in — Vilna. It appeared in 1828, some years after completion of the manuscript. Although less original than his other works, it was a manifesto of the goals of the Haskalah movement in Eastern Europe: study of grammatical Hebrew, foreign languages, secular subjects and sciences. He denounced the Talmud-centered education of Eastern Europe, from the elementary *kheyder* right up to the advanced yeshiva, a maskilic position which resulted in a bitter feud between the traditional majority and the tiny but powerful Haskalah-oriented circle which had the czarist government’s ear.

In Lithuania, the Haskalah was slower to rise. The Litvak, for all his proverbial rationalism and common sense and skepticism, was deeply

rooted in rabbinic authority, and the natural tendency for a Lithuanian Jew was to synthesize old and new, not to “rebel” or “denounce” what had been held most dearly for thousands of years. One of the earliest exemplars is perhaps a scholar whose own roots go back to the “Paduans.” Yehude ben Mordechai ha-Leyvi Hurvitz practiced medicine in Vilna and then in Grodna (where he died in 1797). He branched out from medicine to moral philosophy, and wrote a number of books in Hebrew that are far from the norm of the day. In one of them he lambasts the rabbinate for what he calls disdain for simple people. In another, constructed as a debate between protagonists for the Hasidim and the Misnagdim, he presents a “third way” comprising an enlightenment that would be based upon tradition rather than a war on tradition. His interpretation of messianism is more than a little reminiscent of ideas that Jewish philosophers would espouse some two centuries later. The Jewish Messiah represents a goal that can be attained only in a moral and ethical society, and only in the context of all of humanity, not just the Jewish people.

Hurvitz’s most famous work is *Amudey beys Yehudo* (“Pillars of the House of Judah”). In a typically playful double meaning, Judah is both the author’s given name and a reference to the Biblical House of Judah, a metaphor for the Jewish people. It is written in the form of a debate between three parties, one representing the animalistic instincts, a second the feelings, and a third the critical faculty (somewhat reminiscent of, though not precisely parallel with Freud’s id, ego

and superego). The book contains an appreciative poem by one of Mendelssohn's inner circle, Naphtali Herz Wessely (1725—1805). Nevertheless, Hurvitz cannot really be considered a “follower” of the program of “the Berliners,” as the members of the movement's central circle in Berlin were known.

What makes Hurvitz an individualist is his double rejection of the central-community based Jewish society of the day with all its shortcomings and stratifications, and the lack of ethics and morality in so much of the European culture that the Berliners worshipped as the paragon of truth and beauty. Between the lines of all his works is the clamor for a modernized, ethical based Judaism that draws on its many internal sources.

But one thing was typically *Litvish* — Lithuanian Jewish — in Hurvitz and those who were to follow: the tendency to accept that part of the Haskalah which stressed immersion in new subjects and general sciences. It has to be remembered that one of the greatest foes of the Berlin Haskalah, the Gaon of Vilna, himself wrote tracts on Hebrew grammar, trigonometry and astronomy.

One grand individualist Litvak of the period is the German (yes, German!) philosopher Solomon Maimon (1754—1800; see the image section on pp. 219-220). He was born and grew up in the depths of Lita, on the estates of Prince Radziwill near Mir (a town that later came to be celebrated in the Jewish world for its great yeshiva; see p. 147). He was a boy wonder at Talmud, but in his father's bookcase he found a number of He-

brew and Aramaic volumes in addition to the Talmud, and immersed himself in those as well. He taught himself the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets from the few words on the reverse title pages of Talmudic volumes which sometimes give the place of printing, the printer's data, censors' authorizations, and so forth. His father's financial misfortunes led the boy to live in various other towns in the region, including Ivyánets and Nyézvish (now Ivianec and Niezviž, Belarus). He was betrothed at eleven, and romantic adventures (especially — misadventures), become a pattern for the rest of his life, which led to him not once “to leave town by sundown,” so to speak, to start again elsewhere. A skeptic from his earliest youth, he loved playing pranks on religious people. His autobiography recounts the trick he played on his hated mother-in-law: when she was asleep he slipped over to her bed, and mimicked his own dead mother's voice, saying: “You ungodly woman, why do you treat my beloved son so badly?” The mother-in-law duly rushed to the dead woman's grave the next day, and according to an old folkloristic practice, begged forgiveness at the grave, proceeded to have the burial ground measured, and ordered a wax taper equal to the circumference of the burial ground, for burning at the synagogue, to expiate the sin.

This prankster's considerable sexual appetite was more than matched by his thirst for knowledge. A book of the Kabbalah that he found ignited his thirst for philosophy. During his travels he hit upon early groups of Hasidim, and hastened to join various activities to learn more about

them. His opinion was in its own way every bit as scathing as the Gaon of Vilna's, except that his starting point was a debunking of the traditional pietistic way, too.

"The new religious movement was designed to make it easier to be a blessed person, insofar as it declares that fasts and vigils and the constant study of Talmud are not only useless, but even prejudicial to that happiness of spirit which is essential to genuine piety. It was therefore only natural that the adherents of the movement multiplied very rapidly. [...] The dryness and unfruitfulness of rabbinical studies, the huge burden of the ritual laws, which the new movement promised to lighten, and finally, the tendency to fanaticism and love of the wondrous, which are nurtured by this movement..."

Young Solomon traveled to Poland and Germany seeking to find his way to wider culture. He had become a lifelong admirer of Maimonides, and adopted the surname Maimon to honor his intellectual hero (Maimonides was Moses ben Maimon). He traveled from town to town giving lessons to young pupils in traditional families, and usually had to leave when it was discovered he was a heretic. He recounts in his autobiography a scene in Posen where he went to the modern, Haskalah inspired school:

"The pupils were struck by my strange dress, and approached to ask whence I came and what I wanted. Their questions I answered in my Lithuanian dialect [of Yiddish], at which they began to laugh and make merry at my expense."

He eventually established a correspondence with Moses Mendelssohn, who was flabbergasted to receive profound philosophical manuscripts in Hebrew from the "depths of darkness,"

as Mendelssohn regarded the Jewish culture of Eastern Ashkenaz. Of course this is yet another case of an individualistic Litvak having come to secular studies himself, and only then discovering the Berlin Haskalah. Mendelssohn welcomed the young Litvak into his home and introduced him to his circle of elegant, wealthy intellectuals. They looked after all the newcomer's needs. After some time, however, Mendelssohn called the boy wonder into his parlor to tell him of three complaints that had been coming his way from his friends in Berlin: Maimon had no plan for a settled life; he was spreading dangerous opinions and systems; and finally, that he was rumored to "be leading a loose life, and to be much addicted to sensual pleasures."

When he was taken in by a Jewish family in the Hague, all was looking bright again, until he refused to join the family in the blessing over wine.

"It was only my love of truth, I made clear, and my desisting from inconsistency that made it impossible for me, without obvious revulsion, to say prayers which I regarded as a result of an anthropomorphic system of theology. Upon hearing this, their tolerance was completely exhausted. They despised me as a heretic worthy of damnation, and explained that it would be an awful sin to tolerate me in a Jewish household."

Fed up with all of it, he decided to be baptized. He prepared a text for the priest, "in German with Hebrew characters, went to a schoolmaster, and got him to copy it in German characters." Included in the text was this little declaration:

"I have therefore resolved, in order to obtain worldly as well as eternal happiness, which depends on

attaining perfection, and to become useful to myself and to others, to embrace the Christian religion. Judaism, it is true, comes closer to reason in its principles of faith than Christianity. But in practical use the latter has an advantage over the former; and because morality which comprises not opinions but deeds, is the aim of all religion generally, clearly the latter comes nearer than the former. Furthermore, I hold the mysteries of Christianity for what they are: allegorical representations of the truths that are most important to man [...]"

The pastor replied:

"For the present I cannot be satisfied with your confession of faith. You should therefore pray to God, that He may enlighten you with His grace, and provide you with the true spirit of Christianity, and then come to me again."

During the last (and very productive) six years of his short life, he found refuge on the estate of a Christian, the nobleman Adolf von Kalkreuth.

These and many other colorful scenes from the life of Solomon Maimon are drawn from his charming autobiography, which appeared in German in two parts, in 1792 and 1793.

But far from being just the colorful rebel of his own description, Maimon was a major scholar, leaving some twelve books and some sixty learned papers.

He became a major philosopher (in general, not Jewish philosophy, though his works on Maimonides and some which have yet to published deserve more attention). His primary contributions are his books in German, and most famously, his work on transcendental philosophy, *Versuch über die Transscendentalphilosophie* (Berlin

1790). In it, he challenges various of Immanuel Kant's premises. Both agreed, for example, that the process by which the mind perceives the outside is related to "the thing in itself" that is unknowable but nevertheless exists outside the mind. Maimon held that it exists in the mind. In the end, Maimon's reasoning leads him to posit an infinite intellect which creates in our minds all sorts of relations to things (after all...).

The one great "success" of Maimon's life in terms of outside recognition came in the form of a single sentence of Immanuel Kant to the friend who had sent him Maimon's book:

"[...] to demonstrate, not only that none of my opponents understood me and the basic problem so well, but that very few could claim so much penetration as Mr. Maimon in profound enquiries of this sort [...]"



In the meantime, the Haskalah movement was growing in Lithuania, but in a direction that differed starkly from its incarnations "down south" in Poland, Galicia, Ukraine and the adjoining areas. In the non-Lithuanian areas, we must remember, the majority had previously become Hasidim. What with its belief in the infallible rebbe and his miracles, plus all the drinking and merrymaking, and the wild gesticulations during prayer, Hasidism all in all made a much better "target" for the Maskilim than the "dry" Lithuanian obsession with learning and scholarship. Naturally, the Lithuanian Maskilim were critical of the overriding position of the Talmud

in the scholarly tradition, but the vast majority managed to synthesize new forms of modern Jewish culture with much less of the rancor that was seen down south. In terms of bitterness, things were now reversed. From the first Vilna Ban (*khéyrem*) of 1772 against the Hasidim through to the early years of the nineteenth century, the real bitterness was that between the western and central Lithuanian Jews, who came to be the Misnagdim (opponents) of their neighbors to the east, the Lithuanian Hasidim. In the nineteenth century, that dispute died down and the two sides teamed up with each other to fight the Maskilim who were helping the czarist authorities in their own quest to clamp down on traditional Jewish education. In the south, the Maskilim and the “real” (= southern) Hasidim — unlike the compromise Chabad type Hasidism of the north — were opposites in every way, shape and form. Total belief in the rebbe and modern rationalism were now pitted against each other in the south. That is a lucid confrontation of polaric opposites.

Some of the southern maskilic tracts could easily be mistaken for anti-Semitic satire, if their cultural and historical context were not known. Joseph Perl (1773—1839), a native of Tarnopol, Galicia, wrote a work in German, *Über das Wesen der Sekte Chassidim*, in 1816, in which he not only condemned Hasidism but urged the Austrian authorities to take severe action against the Hasidim. His most famous work was however written in both Yiddish and Hebrew (published at first in Hebrew). Called *Megále tmirin* (“Revealer of Secrets”), it attempts to ape the

Hasidic tale in its construction, which revolves around a rather clumsy and simplistic plot: the ridiculous Hasidim fall over each other in intrigues and devices to get at a certain “German book” and its evil author (no doubt Mr. Perl himself...).

Among the next generation of southern maskilic Hasidim-bashers was Isaac Joel Linetzky (1838—1915) of Podolia, Ukraine. His best known work is the clumsy novel *Dos poylishe yingl* (“The Polish Boy”), a satire against the Hasidim with slips into the grotesque and semi-vulgar. But, like other Maskilim down south, he was, willingly or unwillingly, developing Yiddish as the language of modern genres of creativity, a development weaker in the north, because the scholarly milieu there made for more solid continuity of the parts of Ashkenazic culture traditionally carried out in Hebrew and Aramaic.

The northern Maskilim were frankly influenced by Eylohu the Gaon of Vilna much more than by Moses Mendelssohn the Enlightener of Berlin. After all, the greatest Talmudic and Kabbalistic scholar of Jewish Eastern Europe, the Gaon, himself wrote tracts on trigonometry, astronomy and Hebrew grammar. Such studies are part and parcel of what the Haskalah was all about, broadening the horizons over and beyond the world of Torah, Talmud, Kabbalah, and Prayer to subjects in the wider world.

That is not to say that the Gaon of Vilna and his circle and pupils were Maskilim. Far from it. By definition the Gaon’s circle were Torah Jews who believed they would be better Torah scholars if they mastered more and more of the sciences of

the world. They were all classic Ashkenazim, speaking in Yiddish, writing in Hebrew, Aramaic and Yiddish in more or less the conventional complementation of roles (see p. 44). And, by definition, the Maskilim rejected the divinity of the Torah and the infallibility of the generations of rabbinic interpreters and legislators. Moreover, if they deified anything, it was modern western culture: languages, philosophy, the sciences, the professions, the arts, and so forth. Put differently, the Gaon's circle of scholars who wanted to broaden their scholarly horizons beyond Torah were loyal carriers of the civilization Ashkenaz; Maskilim, by contrast, were out to replace it, to become acculturated to the societies in which they live, while retaining that which they picked and chose as being valuable from a cultural, spiritual, historic or social point of view, using their own powers of reason. Put differently again, there were two very different life goals for the two types. For one the highest achievement was to excel at Torah, to solve some ancient textual contradiction with a brilliant analysis or reconstruction; for the other, the highest achievements were the same as for the gentiles: university education and accomplishment in one of the recognized fields of endeavor cherished by western civilization.

We have seen that the brilliant and eccentric and defying-all-classification Solomon Maimon actually befriended Mendelssohn at one point in his life, but Maimon could scarcely be considered a Maskil in the sense of someone who seeks to broaden the horizons of, and provide modern education for, the Jewish masses. He was

a Lithuanian Talmudic scholar turned German philosopher, who wrote a delightful autobiography written with the tone of someone from the twenty-first century who went back in time and was able to report to us about what things were like back then in Jewish Lithuania and countries to its west.

Someone who might do as a "proper Lithuanian Maskil" is Menashe Ilyer (1767—1831), a native of Smargón (now in Belarus) who lived for many years in Ilye, a shtetl to the east. He was a friend of the Gaon of Vilna but the friendship soured when the Gaon found out that Menashe had also visited Shneur-Zalmen, the founder of Chabad. Menashe was a renowned Talmudic scholar admired by scholars near and far, but the renown turned to notoriety when he rejected interpretations of Rashi, *Toysfes*, and the *Shúlkhon órukh*. As a young man, Menashe, seeking to hear everybody out in the spirit of the modern intellectual, set out for Berlin to meet Mendelssohn, but a number of influential religious Jews in Königsberg convinced the Prussian border authorities to refuse him passage. Incidents such as these demonstrate just how burning the issues were. In one of his major works (published at Vilna in 1807), Menashe Ilyer offers a classic maskilic analysis of the Jewish situation calling for a broadening of the intellectual realms which are studied, and on many more young men to become artisans instead of talentless Talmudic idlers (what we might call hacks today). Most intriguingly, the book's introduction calls for a truce in the cultural conflict between the Hasidim and

the Misnagdim. The name of this book, incidentally, is *Pesher Dovor*, taken in good old style from a Biblical phrase, usually rendered “interpretation of a thing” (Ecclesiastes 8: 1). Biblical lexicography notwithstanding, the title alluringly alludes to a later Hebrew meaning of the root meaning “compromise” which is closely related to everyday Yiddish *p(e)shóre* (Ashkenazic Hebrew *peshoro*).

Another of Menashe Ilyer’s works is a little bilingual book, written in Hebrew and Yiddish, with two titles, one in Aramaic, one in Yiddish. The Aramaic *Sámo d’Kháyey* can mean “elixir of life” or “healing drug.” This is followed by the Yiddish title *Lebn mitl*, meaning “a means for life” or thereabouts. Only the first portion appeared, in 1823, and for some reason, it has become one of the rarest Jewish books in the world.

Ilyer (also called Ben Porath) attracted controversy throughout his colorful life, which included his invention of at least two machines: one for threshing, and one for processing tobacco. Neither was taken up and the designs have been lost.

He was loved and hated. After he died in a cholera epidemic, his adherents did all they could to publish his works and preserve his memory. One of them, Mordechai Plungyan published a biography of his master in 1858.

There were many more individualist Litvaks who found various forms of expression throughout the nineteenth century.



Just as its protagonists were individualists and “characters” rather than “movement types,” so the Haskalah in Lithuania was itself more akin to a series of colorful interludes, in the spirit of the time and place, rather than some kind of centralized movement in our current sense of the notion.

One of the most productive, if transient, episodes is the “Shklov Interlude” that has been splendidly researched by David E. Fishman in one of the most important studies on Lithuanian Jewry (his *Russia’s First Modern Jews*, 1995).

The first partition of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth in 1772 took Shklov, a town out in the far east of Jewish Lithuania, and its region (now in the far east of Belarus), *out* of Lithuania (or the Lithuania component of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) and *into* the Russian (czarist) Empire. The western and central regions of Lita were left in Lithuania for another two decades until they too were added to the Russian Empire in the second and final partitions of Poland in the 1790s.

And so, external forces resulted in the setting up of a Litvak corner that found itself in the western “newlands” of the Russian Empire, and suddenly in a different country from its spiritual capital, Vilna. Add to this the meteoric rise of Chabad Hasidism in that very region (Vitebsk, Mohilov, and the villages Lyadi, Lyozna, Káleshik, Lubavitch, all in the area) and the bitter Hasidic-Misnagdic conflict that was still raging.

Then came two additional factors, one emanating from Vilna; the other by happenstance of Russian Empire history.

From the Vilna side, the Gaon of Vilna had powerful disciples and pupils from Shklov or related to Shklov. They were staunch Misnagdim and also intellectuals in the spirit of the Gaon who believed in all study as valuable. Perhaps the primary force was Benyomin ben Shloyme-Zalmen Rivlin (1728—1812), a relative of the Gaon and son of a delegate from Raysn (the eastern part of Jewish Lithuania) to the Council of Lithuania. He had spent years in Vilna studying with the Gaon, and then returned home to Shklov around 1772, just when the region was annexed to Russia. We have already seen the Gaon's sons' eulogy for Shloyme-Zalmen Rivlin in their biography of their father, as well as their copious praise for "the brothers": Simkhe-Bunim and Menachem-Mendel Bendet (see p. 103).

"Overnight," these Shklov scholars turned the city into the "first colony" of the new Vilna scholarship of the Gaon. Benyomin Rivlin and the Bendet brothers founded yeshivas which are, retrospectively speaking, the first to be established by the Gaon's pupils, before the famous and long-lasting one at Valozhin. Menachem-Mendel published many learned tomes on Kabbalah. Moreover, the Gaon's own brother, Avrom ben Shloyme-Zalmen (1742—1807) served as city *mágid* or preacher in Shklov in the 1780s. His most famous work, *Máyles ha-Tóyre* (*Maaloys ha-Toyro*, "Virtues of Torah") appeared in Vilna in 1824. Another great scholar of Shklov who joined the circle was Yisroel ben Shmuel, author of Talmudic treatises.

All this "should have" made Shklov a satellite of Vilna in the Lithuanian tradition of rabbinic

culture. But life is never that simple. The Shklov circle developed ties to the Berlin Haskalah at the very same time. The most famous exponent of these ties is Boruch Shik of Shklov (Boruch Shklover, Baruch Shick, 1744—1808). He is famous for his translation into Hebrew of Euclid's *Elements*, that appeared in Berlin in 1777; not so much for the translation (it was not the first into Hebrew), but for his "name dropping" in the introduction, where he remarks that the Gaon himself had told him to set out on this work, because every failure of knowledge in the sciences leads to hundredfold failure in Torah studies, and one must spread knowledge among the people of Israel.

In the spirit of the times (a sort of latter-day mini Jewish intellectual humanism), Boruch Shik did not concentrate his secular studies in any one field, and if we set aside his recollection of the Gaon's remark to him regarding Euclid, his major secular work is a work on astronomy called *Seyfer Yesod Oylom* ("Book of the Foundation of the World" or "of the Universe" — the phrase in Proverbs 10: 25, from which it comes is often translated "everlasting foundation"). It was published with great enthusiasm in Berlin, by the circle of Moses Mendelssohn, including the great man himself, in 1777. So there we are: the Berlin Maskilim published their first major work in Hebrew and it was not by one of their own but by a follower of the Gaon of Vilna from the far east of Jewish Lithuania, from Shklov!

The Shklov center was thus a conglomerate of Vilna rabbinic learning with an injection of Berlin enthusiasm for secular studies. Within

Lithuania, the group was steadfastly pro-Gaon and anti-Hasidic. Their steadfastness in this respect was of no lesser magnitude than in Vilna, and perhaps greater (remember, they were not in Vilna but in Mohilev province where Chabad Hasidism was born and had its strongest nest). In 1775, the Shklov circle organized a public disputation with the Hasidim, at which their two leaders, Shneur Zalmen and his Hasidic competitor, Avrom Kalishke were abused. Twelve years later, the Shklov community leaders issued a ban entailing many harsh measures against the Hasidim.

As if this synthesis of strands of “Berlin” with a generous dose of “Vilna” in the City of Shklov were not exotic enough, a Russian “romantic” element came into the mix. Shortly after Shklov became part of the Russian Empire, the empress, Catherine the Great, gave the confiscated estates of Shklov to her “admirer” Count Semion Gavrilovich Zorich. But when she broke off their relationship in 1778, she banned him from St. Petersburg and gave him a big cash payoff. The man settled into a splendid palace on his new estate in Shklov, and proceeded to bring High Russian Culture to the place in every sense of the word. In addition to launching a parlor of lavish parties and merrymaking, he established a theater (building it specially), a dance school, science laboratory, art gallery, library, and an Academy that was the first non-church school in Belorussia. To all his institutions he brought talented directors and instructors from across Europe. Suddenly Shklov was a cosmopolitan island of high European culture.

Whatever his initial antipathies may have been toward the Jews in Shklov, his relationship with leaders of the local community (which constituted an overwhelming majority of the residents of the city), grew over time. He got into close cahoots with Jewish businessmen and together the Court of Zorich and the Jewish business community turned Shklov into a boom town. Nota Notkin and Joshua Zeitlin became close confidantes of the Zorich court. Both of them had close contacts with the Berlin circle and befriended Mendelssohn personally. Zeitlin was simultaneously a leading traditional Lithuanian rabbinic scholar, who had studied at a yeshiva in Minsk. In 1802, he helped finance Chaim Valozhimer’s new yeshiva at Valozhin (see p. 147), which was to become the “mother of Lithuanian yeshivas” and he led a fundraising campaign on its behalf.

And so it came to pass that the brief “meteor Shklov” in Lithuanian Jewish cultural history was to have a permanent impact. “Brief” because it all came to an end as rapidly as it had risen. After the final partitions of Poland in the 1790s, Shklov was no longer a border town and lost all the commercial benefits that accrue to such places. The great benefactor Zorich died in 1799, virtually all his cultural institutions collapsed, and their human talents moved to bigger places. After a few short years, the Jewish community became impoverished. The crushing 1804 Russian czarist edicts reconfirmed the worst of the earlier edicts: it forbade Jews to live outside the Pale of Settlement (established in 1794); kept Jewish taxation at double the normal rate (also from 1794); or-

dered the expulsion of the Jews from the countryside and its hamlets (renewing an edict of 1795); prohibited sale or production of alcoholic beverages; did away with the remaining powers of the institutions of local Jewish autonomy. Coming on top of everything else that hit Shklov, this spelled the end of this very special center that brought together the various strands of Lithuanian Jewish culture.

The remaining rabbinic scholars carried out a daring plan. They migrated to the Land of Israel! Most settled in one of its “four holy cities,” Safad, which had earlier won its fame as the sixteenth century center of Kabbalah. The first group, led by Menachem-Mendel Bendet, set out in 1808. The great Rabbi Israel of Shklov led a second contingent in 1809. Other adherents of the Gaon of Vilna from different parts of Jewish Lithuania followed. By 1815 there were close to

five hundred Shklov people settled in Safad, and they built their own yeshiva and synagogue. The colony of “The Gaon’s *prúshim* (‘ascetic scholars’)” remains well-known in Jewish history. The aged founder of “Gaonite” rabbinics in Shklov, Benyomin Rivlin, set out from Shklov for Safad in 1812, but unlike Moses before him, was not even destined to make it to the outskirts. He died not far from Mohilev.

The upshot of it all is that Lithuanian Jewry, from its most traditional (the likes of the Gaon) to its most radical (the Maskilim) exhibited a desire for secular learning beyond the realm of the Talmud and its literature. That trend was not a new one. In the early sixteenth century, the Polish traveler Maciej Miechowita remarked with some astonishment that the Jews of Lithuania “use Hebrew books for the study of the sciences, the arts, astronomy and medicine.”

Joseph Solomon Delmedigo



Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

Joseph Solomon
Delmedigo

Joseph Solomon Delmedigo (1591—1655) was not a Litvak. He was born into a scholarly Jewish family in Crete, studied astronomy under Galileo in Padua, and spent time in Egypt. In 1620 he was living in Vilna where he became the private doctor of Prince Radziwill and other nobles. He is the author of dozens of works.

It is hard to know precisely what influence he had on the further development of Lithuanian Jewish culture. His synthesis of Jewish and secular learning, and his ability to work closely with traditional Jews, Karaites, and Christians alike seems to indicate a spirit kindred to the evolving special character of Lithuanian Jewry.

This book, *Seyfer Eylim*, was apparently his first to be published (see p. 201). It is an intellectual dialogue with a major Karaite scholar he had befriended in Lithuania, Zerach ben Nathan of Iroki (born 1578).



Delmedigo's famous book

Reaching for secular knowledge in the eighteenth century

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Unlike their counterparts in Germany, eighteenth century Lithuanian Jews who craved secular knowledge did not see the need to do so in a spirit of rejectionism of traditional Jewish culture. To the contrary, they sought to demonstrate the harmony of the two. One of the best known exemplars is Boruch

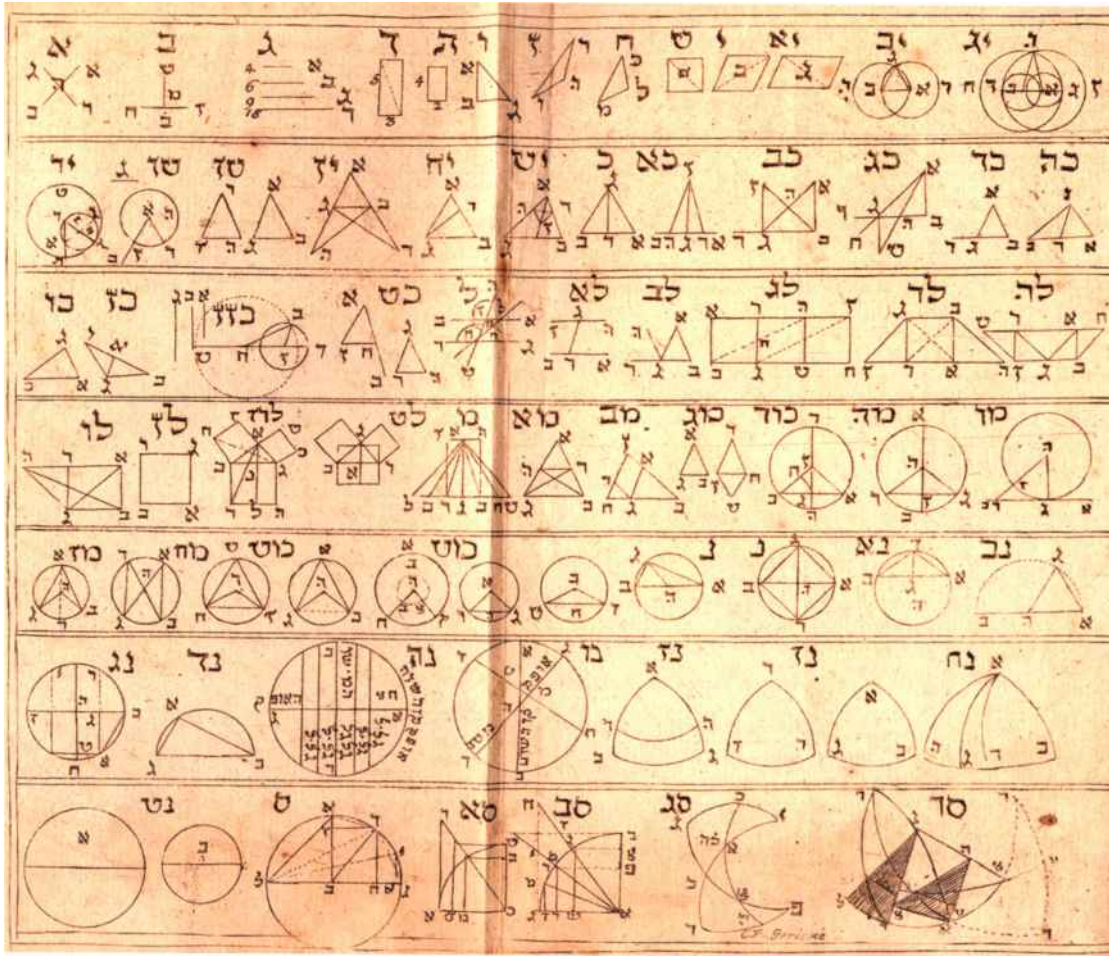
Shklover (or Baruch Shick, 1744—1808), a key figure in the “Shklov revival” (see p. 212).

Born in Shklov, he completed his rabbinic education in Minsk. To study medicine, he moved to London (where he joined the Freemasons). He sojourned in Berlin where he befriended the leaders of the Berlin Enlightenment movement, and published his revised edition of a work on astronomy originally compiled in the ninth or tenth century. Called *Seifer Yesod Oylom* (“Book of the Foundation of the Universe”), it appeared in Berlin in 1777.



Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

Title page of Boruch Shklover's book on astronomy (Berlin, 1777).



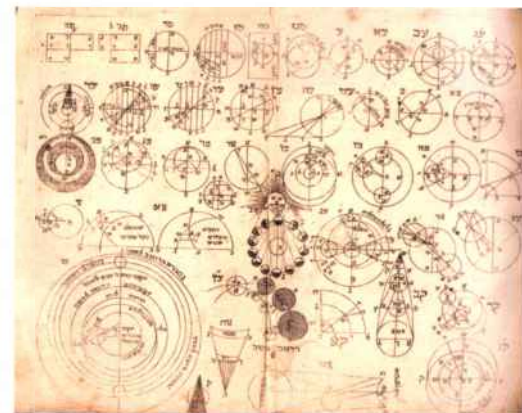
Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

Charting the universe in Hebrew, in the

eighteenth century:

two pages from Boruch Shklover's *Seyfer Yesod*

Oylom (Berlin 1772)



Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection



Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

Euclid's geometry in Hebrew (called *Sefer Hakhma* "The Book of Euclid") by "Boruch the son of the brilliant rabbi, our teacher Rabbi Jacob, of the sacred community of the crowning city of Shklov, whose steady place of abode is now in the sacred community of Minsk in Lithuania" (Amsterdam, 1780)

On his way back east from Berlin, Boruch spent some time in Vilna in 1778, and became part of the Vilna Gaon's inner circle. In 1780, he published a translation of the first part of Euclid's treatise on geometry, *The Elements*, noting in the introduction that the Gaon had told him that general scientific knowledge was vital for Torah study and research.

During this period, there were also a number of well-known Lithuanian Jewish doctors, most of whom studied in Padua, Italy, and returned home to practice medicine. One curious "reverse scenario" is exemplified by a German Jew, Isaiah Jacob Frank who came to Lithuania to study medicine at Vilna's university. His dissertation, which appeared in Latin in 1793, is thought to be one of the first medical dissertations to appear in any language in Lithuania.



Lithuanian Academy of Sciences

Isaiah Jacob Frank's 1793 medical dissertation in Vilna

The Lithuanian Jewish boy who grew up to be a German philosopher. . .

It is said that the great claim to fame of Solomon Maimon (\pm 1754—1800) is a quote by the celebrated philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724—1804). After reading one of Maimon's manuscripts, Kant remarked (in a 1789 letter) that nobody understood his philosophy as well as this fellow Maimon.

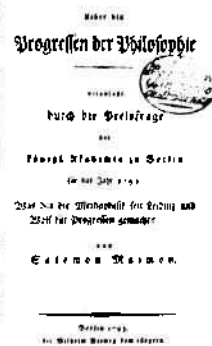
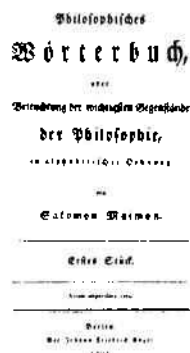
Born near Nezvizh (now Niašviž, Belarus), Maimon was from the earliest age a social and conceptual rebel as well as a genius, with an insatiable thirst for books, philosophy and worldly knowledge. His analogous thirst for worldly pleasures was a factor in the many colorful (sometimes slapstick) escapades and forced continuous relocations through most of his short life.

His major contributions are to general philosophy, and are preserved in those of his works published in German in the 1790s. He is best known for his interpretations of Kant, but also did a lot of work on theories of infinite intellect and of determinability. His contributions include a dictionary of philosophy, a history of philosophy, a proposed new system of logic, and essays on the most contentious issues in the field.



Solomon Maimon

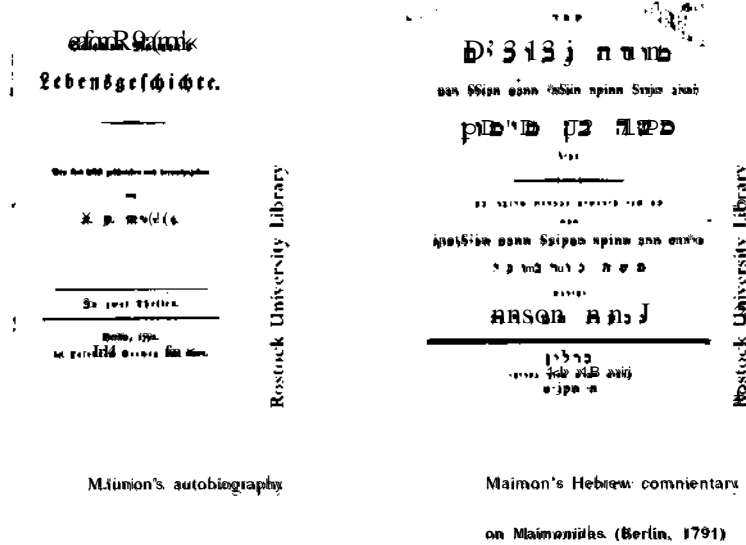
Maimon's major philosophical works in German



In Jewish cultural history he is best known for his autobiography (1792—1793) which touches on his experience of village and rural life in Lithuania, Jewish and general culture of the day, the earliest Hasidim, and the Berlin “enlighteners,” all written in an uncannily modern voice. It has been translated into English, Hebrew and Yiddish.

Maimon took his surname in honor of Maimonides, and spent a good part of his life “dealing” with Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*. The Berlin 1791 edition contains Maimon’s commentary to the *Guide*. Various of his other works in Hebrew have still not been published. For more on Maimon’s life and work, see pp. 206-208.

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Maimon's autobiography

Maimon's Hebrew commentary
on Maimonides. (Berlin, 1791)

Esperanto, Zamenhof and Yiddish

The handcrafted universalist language Esperanto was the creation of a Litvak born in Bialystok. He was, of course, Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof (1859—1917), whose 1887 *Lingvo Internacia* eventually led to the rise of his movement in all corners of the world. His own pseudonym, Dr. Esperanto (“Dr. Hopeful”) became the name of his novel language. He and his Esperantist followers believe that a universal language, even if a second language to the national languages, can be a bridge between peoples that will bolster tolerance, humanism and intercultural respect.

What is less known about Zamenhof is that he was one of the pioneers of modern Yiddish linguistics. His Yiddish grammar is unfortunately ignored (though it was finally published, by Adolf Holzhaus, in Helsinki in 1982). The major “Zamenhof Yiddish stir” is still his 1909 piece in the prestigious modernist Vilna Yiddish journal, *Lebn un visnshaft* (“Life and Science”). Signing the series of articles “Dr. X,” he advocated radical reform of the Yiddish writing system via replacement of the ancient Jewish right-to-left alphabet with a system of Latinization. The piece resulted in a spirited controversy which kept the avid attention of the journal’s readers. Although the Latinization project never took off in a big way, the changes in spelling he recommended were in the spirit of the rational phonetic spelling being proposed at the time by other Yiddish linguists. In this sense he ended up being one of the reformers of Yiddish orthography in the Yiddish alphabet. In the same series of articles, he also accepted the vast majority of phonetic features of Lithuanian Yiddish as the standard, again, in line with general developments in Yiddish linguistics of the period.



Ludwig Lejzer Zamenhof

Zamenhof died in Warsaw, where his gravestone, all in Esperanto, stands not far from the mausoleum over the graves of the famous Yiddish writers Y. L. Peretz, Sh. An-sky and Y. Dineson.

№ 1 * * * Dr X — רעסארט אין דער יודישער שפראך. 58

Jj	Kk	Ll	Mm	Nn	
י	ק	ל	מ	נ	דער און אונטערע אויגען. ניש אין די- מונער העט מחמא אונטערשטימלען אי- בער דעם. איראפעאזישערע ווארטן. נאר אין אזא חלומיגען ענין ווי צוגע- וואינען דאס פאלק צום ריכטיגען לעזען און שרייבען, אין שאפען פאר דער איני- פעליגען אפריגען צאמרוש צו דער שפראך און דער ליטעראטור פון אידעק בוידעק. — אין אזא חלומיגען ענין האט די געהאוינערט פון אייג. פערשטערט דו, פון בעדייטונג ניש, און אייב קום העלען דו געפינען אונזלעך. האט העלען לאפען, בעדארפען מיר ווי געפערן מיט פערזע- ליכען שוויגען. נאר אויב ס'איז שוין זעהר שווער צו קעמפען מיט דער אל- טער געהאוינערט. קענען מיר דאך, ווי למשל, די רעמטען האבען דו געזאגט אין אזא פאל, איינפירען דעם ליטיגלישען אלף-בית ב'ס לעצטע ח'ג אוי, למשל, קענען די ווארטאגלישע ציטונגען איינע א העלעך ס'איז פון ווערען אבמהלונגען און היינען דוקען מיט ליטיגלישע בולשעאפען, דערנאך די צאהל פון אונזלעך אבמה- לונגען פערזעסערן כ'ו די לעצער הע- לען ווי געווארן אינגאנצען אנגעוואוינען צו דעם נייען אלף-בית, העלבער העט מיט דער צייט ארויסשטויסען דעם אלטען, העברעאישען.
Oo	Pp	Rr	Ss	Śś	
א	פ	ר	ס	ש	
Tt	Uu	Vv	Zz	Žž	
ט	וו	וו	ז	זש	

אין יודיש בעקענענט סען זעהר אפס
א לויט, וואס ווערט זעהר קורץ צווישן-
געקערט, און דעם ער איז ניש גלייך צו
קין איינעם פון די קלאסליכען, און-
רעספונדען דענעם ער פארט אלס קלאס-
לויט ביים בילדען די זלבען. היינט ווי אין
יודיש קומט דער דאזיקער לויט שפעקירט
אנשטאט דעם רעמטען e (ע), איז דע-
ריבער לעג איר פאר, סען וואל איהם
שריטען „e, למשל, אין הארט
menčen (מענשען) הערט סען ניש
נאכ'ן e (ש) קען בעשטימען קלאס-
לויט, נאר ס'הערט זיך פונדעסוועגען א
דוספער לויט, וואס בילדעט די זלבען.
הארום דעם הארט menčen קען סען
ניש אויסרעדן אין איין זלבען, על פי
אנצולענדע מיט פראנצויזיש דאך איז אן
דעם דאזיקען לויט דער שטוב ס'ער e.
E און e זענען צוויי בעזונדערע לוי-
טען, צוויי בעזונדערע אויסות, און קענען
ניש פערביטען איינער דעם אנדערן
למשל: Meren (מערען), א וויכער-
שער נאמען) בעדארף סען ניש לייענען
Merén (מערען) און פערקעהרט,
briken (בריקען איבער סיכען) —
briken (בריקען מיט די פיס); cepen
(צעפען) און ניש cepén, cupén (צו-
פען) און ניש cupen.

סען בעדארף שרייבען די ווערטער,
אוי וויילט ווערען אויסגעקערט, און ניש

II

איר לעג פאר דעם ליטיגלישען אלף
בית אין דער פאלגענדער גע'ספאלט:

Aa	Bb	Cc	Ćć	Dd
א	ב	צ	ש	ד
Ee	Ff	Gg	Hh	Ĥĥ
א	פ	ג	ה	ח

Menke Katz Collection

Zamenhof's controversial project to Latinize Yiddish writing, proposed in a Vilna Yiddish journal in 1909

Chapter 10

Hebrew Comes to Life

Hebrew had never “died” in the sense that Sanskrit or Latin ceased to be spoken, though Sanskrit and Latin, like most “dead languages,” experienced the “afterlife” of having given rise to successor languages which are very much alive.

Despite fanciful claims sometimes made, it seems most likely that Hebrew, in anything resembling its classical form as known from the Hebrew Bible, as a genuine vernacular of real speech communities, went under not long after the Babylonian Exile of 586 BC (see p. 26). The Hebrews or Judeans, who in exile became the Jews, created their second major language, Jewish Aramaic, incorporating masses of Hebrew (words, meanings, constructions) into the new language. In that sense the spirit of Hebrew lived on in Jewish Aramaic, which was the language of Jesus and his environment, and of course of most of the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds.

But Hebrew never died as a written language in several senses. It continued to be used for the writing of new works, and it continued to be scrutinized, memorized and recited in the study of old works, including the Bible and Mishna. And, from the time of the institution of regular prayers instead of the ancient animal sacrifices some two thousand years ago, it became the lan-

guage of daily prayer and blessings (note though that some of the most emotively hallowed prayers, such as the kaddish prayer for the dead, are in Aramaic). Hebrew, then, lived on in two senses: as a spoken part of the new spoken language Aramaic, and a written medium for studying and reciting old texts and creating new ones.

The picture is extended with the advent of the European period in Jewish history. The major spoken language of world Jewry was no longer Aramaic. Of the new European Jewish vernaculars, Yiddish was destined to become the successor to Aramaic in the sense of becoming the vernacular of the vast majority of Jews. This time, the new language — Yiddish — incorporated into itself a Hebrew *and* Aramaic component. Each major Jewish language became a part of the next. Hence there is a Hebrew component in Aramaic, and a Hebrew and Aramaic component in Yiddish. This comes as no surprise, given the continuity of the people involved.

Jewish Aramaic preserved much of the vocabulary as well as the spirit of ancient Hebrew in the everyday vernacular of Jews. The process repeated itself in Old Ashkenaz, when the Aramaic-with-Hebrew-within-it fused with Germanic (more specifically, medieval German city

dialects), the result was a new language that again preserved much of the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic culture in its everyday linguistic fabric.

Let us take some everyday examples from Yiddish. The ancient Hebrew word for “book,” *sefer* survived into Yiddish as *seyfer* but in the modified sense of “sacred traditional Jewish book” (as opposed to Germanic derived *bukh* which refers to other kinds of books, say modern or secular books). But many of the Semitic words in Yiddish are everyday words, not “specifically Jewish” words, for example *aváde* (“of course”), *behéyme* (“cow”), *pónim* (“face”), *mistáme* (“probably”). Dictionaries will tell you that the first and fourth are “Aramaic” and the second and third of these examples “Hebrew” but within Yiddish they are of course all “completely Yiddish.”

But that is not to say that Yiddish speakers are not aware of the derivation of most of the words in their language. In the case of the Hebrew and Aramaic elements in the language, the awareness is kept alive in each generation by the special pattern of internal Ashkenazic trilingualism (see the diagrams on p. 44). To take an example from Lithuanian Yiddish, the everyday word for table is *tish*, and it occurs in a host of connections (for example *kumen tsum tish*, lit. “come to the table” used in the sense of “reach an understanding or agreement about something”). The Hebrew word for table, *shulkhon* survives in the name of the well-known code of law by Joseph Karo (see p. 61), the *Shulkhon órukh*, though only the Hebraically learned would actively think of that name as meaning “the set table.” But then there was a tradition

in many traditional homes to try to use Hebrew on the Sabbath, especially at Sabbath meals. Hence words such as *shulkhon* for “table” and *melakh* for “salt” became part of a special register of the language for Sabbath. At the other end of the spectrum, there are many insults and vulgarisms derived from Hebraic roots. Insults include *meshúgener* (“crazy guy”), *péyte* (“dope”) and *shíker* (“drunk”).

In short, Yiddish civilization kept knowledge of Hebrew very near the surface: embedded in the everyday language; the special language of Sabbath and other holy uses; the language of daily prayer and of many blessings and sayings and quotations used in everyday life; the language for the writing of original documents in an array of genres including letters, community records and serious works of scholarship.

The Yiddish speaker’s sophistication in matters Hebraic often extended to a sociological or stylistic differentiation for one and the “same” word (as far as etymology goes) that has a variety of incarnations in living Ashkenazic culture. Thus *pésakh* in the study of the Bible refers to the paschal sacrifice offering of the ancient Hebrew; *péysakh* refers to the Jewish holiday Passover; the morphologically Aramaic form, *páskhe* refers to the Christian Easter.

Ancient (and modern Israeli) Hebrew words are usually stressed on the final syllable. In Ashkenaz, stressed moved back one syllable to the penultimate position. In reading the Torah on Sabbath mornings, the careful reader follows the ancient accent marks and would read perhaps

Moyshé for “Moses”; perhaps *Meyshe* in his Lithuanian pronunciation. But in calling a contemporary by that name, it would invariably be *Méyshe* or one of its loving diminutives, most popularly *Méyshke*.

Bearing in mind how steeped the civilization was in Hebraic culture, it may not be exactly a “miracle” that modern Hebrew could be revived as a vernacular. Still, it is a major feat and some even claim it to be unique in the history of languages.

As we shall see from the coming pages, a number of pioneers brought Hebrew to life first in the writing of modern European type works and then in the enormous leap to actually speaking it. The single most important personality in the rebirth of everyday spoken Hebrew was Leyzer Perlman of Luzhik or Luzhke (now Lužki, Belarus, near Druya) who eventually changed his name to Eliezer ben Yehuda, moved to Palestine, and is considered the father of modern spoken Hebrew (see p. 235). But he had a number of forerunners who brought literary Hebrew to the “brink” of being usable. By and large, it was a Litvak enterprise. Its founding center was Vilna.

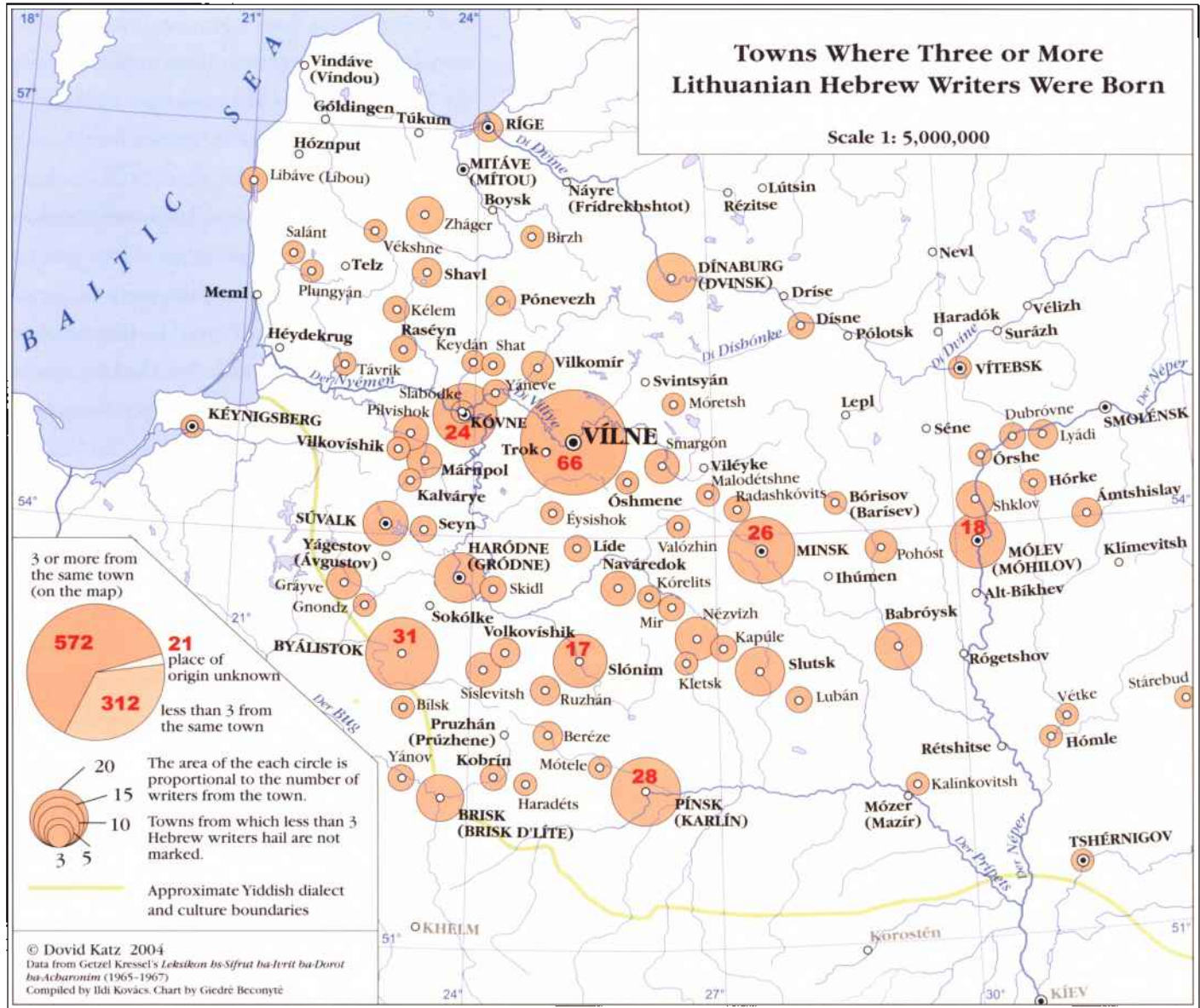


The early Vilna Hebraists were Maskilim, at a time and place where adherence to traditional religious norms usually continued alongside (and in harmony with) the growing fascination with the modern topics being propounded by the Haskalah. Many were what we might today call

“fancy rhymesters,” taking the traditional genre of weaving classical passages and phrases into a bombastic “poem” or “declaration.” The genre became known as *meitse* (*melitso*, *melitsá*), a Hebrew word for a florid over-the-top style. German-Jewish observers could not understand why the Litvak followers of Enlightenment were so hung up on language (“form”) rather than the substance of modern subjects (“content”). Such poems in Hebrew were sometimes composed for weddings, funerals and in honor of high government officials (see p. 314). There was a deeper divide coming to the fore here. The German Jews were out for cultural assimilation; the Litvaks were seeking modern knowledge and expressiveness using Jewish languages and traditions (“form”).

One German-Jewish observer, Isaac Marcus Jost (1793—1860), who had himself tried his hand at modern Hebrew, could not understand the Lithuanian maskilic addiction to the details of the language over and above, as he saw it, the content of what was being written and published. But suddenly, something seemed to “gel” and “Vilna rhyming” was turning into real Hebrew poetry. Not surprisingly, each modern scholar of the rise of Hebrew literature will have his or her favorite “pioneer.”

What is sometimes overlooked by scholars of the rise of modern Hebrew is the *environment* created for the rebirth of the spoken language by the group of dedicated enthusiasts in Vilna. It was that “mini-environment” that set the stage for Ben Yehuda and the others who went on to create the “maxi-environment” in Jerusalem. For the Vilna



group, attempting to speak more and more Hebrew to each other at their meetings (in the spirit, perhaps, in which Esperantists try to use the language at the meetings of their society) went hand in hand with more and more literary experimentation (using Hebrew for ever more contemporary purposes and “playing” with differing strategies for rendering the language suitable to modern needs).

The rise of modern Hebrew can even be plausibly traced to the “salon” at the home of Tsvi-Hirsh Katzenelenbogen (1795—1868), who was known in Vilna as Hirshl Simkhe’s (“Hirshl the son of Simcha”). He was both a high functionary of the official Jewish community and a successful merchant. That his own poetry didn’t amount to much didn’t stop him supporting genuine young talents such as Avrom Dov-Ber Lebensohn (1794—1878), who became the central figure of

Reb Hirsh’s salon and arguably the founder of modern Hebrew poetry (see p. 231).

A second salon was kept by the Klatshkos at their home on Daytshe gas (now Vokiečiq, see p. 114). Tsvi-Hirsh Klatshko (Klachko, 1790—1856) was a businessman who traveled often to Germany and liked the idea of a literary salon in his home. It was his wife, Toybe (Toba) however, who was the force behind the salon which also included many Polish literary figures. It even figures in one of the better known novels of the Polish romantic era prose master Józef Kraszewski (1812—1887).

A third salon developed in the home of the patron of the arts Moyshe Rozenthal.

By the mid 1830s, Mordechai Aaron Ginzburg (see p. 233) had come to town, and Vilna had its “first professional Hebraist.”

The Haskalah movement

The original Haskalah or “German-Jewish Enlightenment movement” aimed to acculturate the Jews to the dominant national culture. In Lithuania, as in other parts of Eastern Europe, it took a completely different turn. Instead of attempting to rid themselves of their own culture, the Lithuanian Maskilim or enlightenment campaigners developed a specific modern Jewish culture by consciously synthesizing their own heritage (languages, history, classical texts) with contemporary non-Jewish ideas, genres and categories. One of the grand results was the modern Hebrew language and Hebrew culture.

Although the Berlin Haskalah launched a Hebrew language periodical, *Ha-Meassef* (“The Gatherer”) in 1783, its Hebrew was stilted and “not going anywhere.” A full-blooded Hebrew arose in Lithuania, the country where traditional Jewish learning was arguably more intensive than anywhere in the world.

One of the forerunners was Judah (Yehude) ben Mordechai ha-Leyvi Hurvitz of Vilna. He studied medicine in Padua and returned to Lithuania where he practiced medicine first in Vilna, then Zhager (now Žagarė, Lithuania), Mitoy (Mitau, now Jelgava, Latvia), and finally in Grodna (now Hrodna, Belarus), where he died in 1797. His best known work is the *Amudey Beys Yehudo* (“Pillars of the House of Judah,” a play on his name and one of the classic names of

Judah Hurvitz's *Amudey Beys Yehudo*
 (“Pillars of the House of Judah”),
 Amsterdam 1766

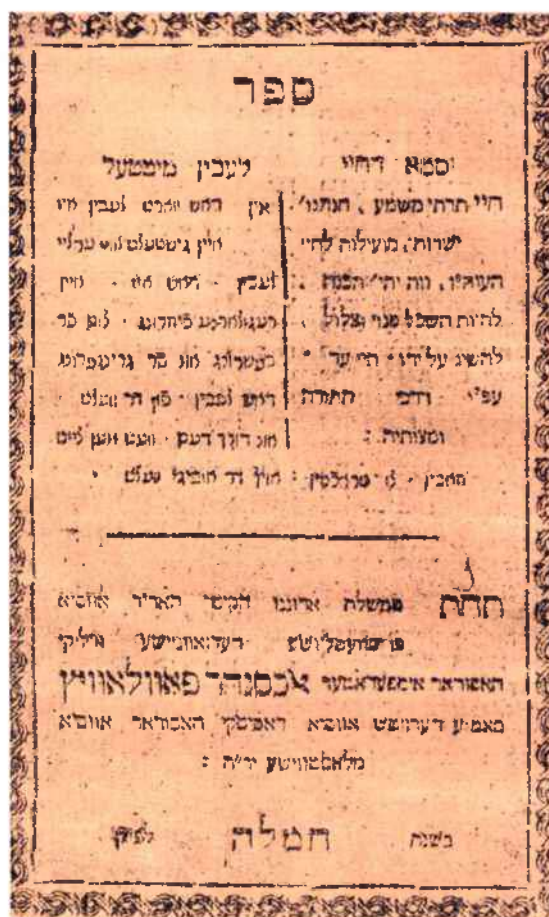


Yivo, Matisyahu Strasban Collection

the Jewish people). It is written in charming “rhymed Hebrew prose” (!) in the form of a debate between three figures, representing different, Freud-like aspects of human nature. It is also a social document which makes fun of the rich who are obsessed with the latest fashions of Paris. The book has about it the spirit of the dawn of a new age of writing based on human intellect and free expression of the critical faculty (see pp. 205-206).

Menashe Iyer (1767—1831), a native of Smargón, became known as “Iyer” because he settled in Ilye and lived there many years (both towns, then in Vilna Province, are now in Belarus). He played the role of the classic “transitional figure.” He was on the one hand an intimate of the Gaon of Vilna well known for his rabbinic erudition. On the other, he became something of a rebel, carrying rationalism “beyond the boundaries” allowed by the fully believing traditional Jew. He claimed, for example, to have understood difficult passages in the Mishna better than the later sages of the Talmud. Mixing the pot even more, he tried to effect an intellectual rapprochement between the Hasidim and Misnagdim. One of his many controversial works is *Pesher Dovor* (“Interpretation of a Thing” from Ecclesiastes 8: 1, but alluding to the related, and popular word *pshoro*, Yiddish *pshóre* meaning “compromise”). It appeared in Vilna in 1827. Another is *Samo d’Chayey* (“Elixir of Life,” an allusion to a Talmudic passage about the words of the Torah having the potential to be either an elixir of life or a deadly poison, after Tractate Sabbath, 88b). It appeared as a bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish booklet in 1823.

Menashe championed the poor and social justice, and did not shirk from spats with the rabbinite. On more than one occasion he came close to being excommunicated. He was the only major figure to befriend both the Gaon of Vilna and the Gaon’s arch-enemy, the Hasidic master Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi. After his meeting with Shneur-Zalmen, however, he found that the Gaon



from a private collection

Menashe Iyer's *Samo d'Chayey* (1823)

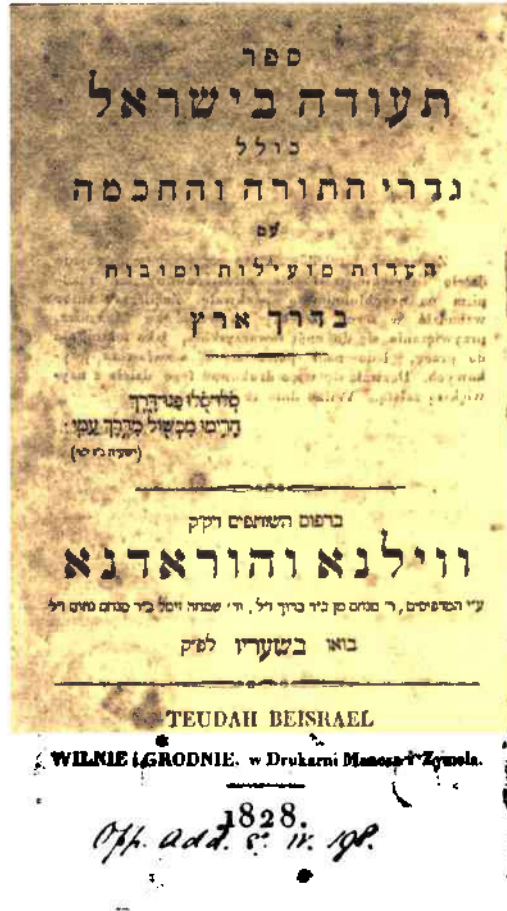
had cooled to him.

The major theoretician of “radical Haskalah” in the Russian Empire was not a Litvak at all; the Lithuanian Maskilim tended to a much more subtle approach involving a fair degree of synthesis with the traditional world. He was Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788—1860) of Kréménits, Volhynia who went so far as to persuade the Russian government to curtail the number of legal Jewish printing presses! When it came to publishing his key work of Haskalah thought, *Teúdo b’Yisróel* (*Teudá be-Yisraél*, “Testimony unto the People of Israel”), his enemies sabotaged publication in his own locales, and he had to come to a city known for intellectual openness — Vilna — to get it published. It appeared in 1828 (under the Romms’ imprint of the period, “Vilna and Grodna”). It deals with a number of issues including the importance of studying Hebrew as well as the secular sciences. His second important work, in the form of responses to the questions of a Christian nobleman, also appeared in Vilna (in 1838).



Leyzer Ran Collection

Isaac Baer Levinsohn



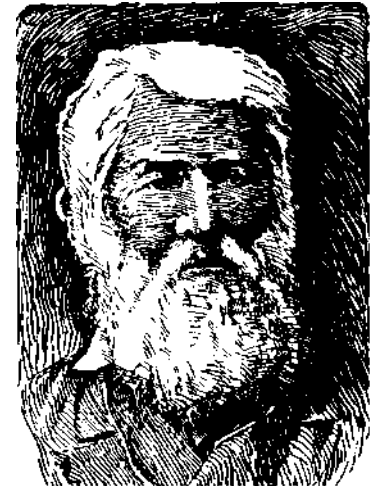
Bodleian Library Oxford

Levinsohn's *Teudo b'Yisroel*
(Vilna and Grodna 1828)

Rise of Modern Hebrew Poetry

Various forms of Hebrew verse had in fact been composed more or less continuously for thousands of years, much of it liturgical. But modern Hebrew poetry arose in the nineteenth century. The question as to who was its founder remains a contentious one, but all three major contenders for the crown were born in the same place — Vilna.

One, Avrom Dov-Ber Lebensohn (1794—1878), is best known by his pen name Ódom ha-Kóyhen (modern Hebrew Adám ha-Kohén). Ódom is an acronymic from Avrom Dov-Ber Mikhalishker (and ends up, with the vowels supplied, being phonetically identical to the ancient Hebrew word for “man”; it was also innovative in that “Adam” was not generally used as a given name among Ashkenazim). The toponymic part of the name comes from the village Michaleshik where he lived many years, and where he was simply known in Yiddish as “Berke Apikéyres” (“Berke the heretic,” because of his modernist leanings; his religious rebellion there consisted of keeping his feet apart during the Eighteen Benedictions when they are supposed to be kept together). He started out with the traditional occupations of composing special “occasion verse” for weddings, funerals, tombstones of the wealthy and in honor of visiting hotshots from the government. He then developed into (arguably) the first modern Hebrew poet, catapulted to fame by his *Shirey sfas kóydesh* (“Poems in the Holy Tongue”), which appeared in 1842 and was epoch making. Among his best known poems is *Ha-Khemlá* (*Ha-Khemlá*, “Mercy”), a powerful complaint to God about harshness and evil. *Dal méyvin* (“The poor man who is wise”) was set to music and became popular. He was also an accomplished Hebrew philologist who wrote a sophisticated commentary to an earlier Hebrew grammar.



Leizer Ran Collection

Ódom ha-Kóyhen (Avrom Dov-Ber Lebensohn)

Most critics agree that Lebensohn was surpassed in sheer poetic talent by his son, Micha Joseph Lebensohn (1828—1852), who was known by his own acronymic: Michal. The younger Lebensohn struggled with consumption for the last and very highly creative years of his life. When he abandoned all hope of a cure in Germany, he returned to die in his beloved native Vilna. Among his best known works is the posthumously published *Kinoyr bas Tsiyoyn* (“Harp of the Daughter of Zion,” Vilna 1870). The Lebensohns are sometimes regarded as a father and son team that created modern Hebrew verse.

The third major pioneer of modern Hebrew verse was Judah Leib Gordon (or Leon Gordon, 1831—1892). He was a more radical *Máskil* and a highly controversial figure. An early graduate of the Russian government’s modernized “rabbinical seminary” in Vilna, he went on to St. Petersburg, where his communal work got him embroiled in a dispute between the local *Misnagdim* and *Hasidim*, the “fault line” of post-Gaonic Lithuanian Jewry. The *Hasidim*, whose complete belief in the supernatural powers of their *rebbe* had earned them Gordon’s scorn, succeeded in betraying him to the czarist authorities as a political criminal. Gordon was arrested in 1879 on the (ludicrous) charge of complicity in an attempt on the life of czar Alexander II! He was imprisoned, and his family exiled to upper Volga. After his innocence was proven, he was allowed to return to St. Petersburg but not to his old post.

His Hebrew poetry has a number of claims to fame. He managed to cover every period of Jewish history from the very beginnings to his own day. His harsh satiric tones had a modern European ring to them, and he became, in a way, the leader of that branch of *Misnagdism* that “went secular” in the nineteenth century, maintaining an anti-*Hasidic* stance from a modern rationalist, rather than a theologically traditionalist, Gaonist, standpoint. Still, his most beloved poetic work remains *Ahavas Dovid u-Mikhal* (“The Love of Dovid and Michal” — see I Samuel, chapters 18 and 19). It appeared in Vilna in 1856.



Leizer Ran Collection

Judah Leib Gordon

Rise of Modern Hebrew Prose

Mordechai-Aaron Ginzburg (1795—1846) created modern Hebrew prose style. Born in western Lithuania in Salant (now Salantai, Lithuania), his erudition became famous in Courland (now western Latvia) when he moved there. He eventually settled in Vilna where he became the driving force of efforts to create a “usable” modern written Hebrew that did not smack of being just a jumble of cleverly stapled together biblical passages. Rejecting purism, he reached out to all the periods of the Hebrew language, and to modern European languages. He made no effort to stick to the purely biblical style which was handicapping the viability of the ancient tongue of the Hebrews as a medium for modern intellectual life. His works include a (translated) book on Christopher Columbus, collections of model letters in Hebrew, histories, poems, satires and even a “vision.”



Leizer Ran Collection

Mordechai-Aaron
Ginzburg

The first Hebrew novel was written by Avrom Mapu of Slabódke, a suburb of Kovna (now the Vilijampolė section of Kaunas). Mapu (1808—1867) was brought up in a religious, mystical family. According to a popular story, his mysticism “collapsed” when he tried to render himself invisible with kabbalistic formulas and was “caught in the act” by a maskilic friend who talked him into modernity. He moved to Rasėyn (Rasciniai) where he studied biblical Hebrew with a master scholar, Senior Sachs (1815—1892).

Mapu wrote many works, but it is his first book, *Ahavas Tsiyoyen* (*Ahavat Tzion*, “Love of Zion”) that is considered the first modern Hebrew novel. Originally published in Vilna in 1853, it synthesizes elements of French romanticism with the biblical heritage in a love story that is set in the days of King Hezekiah of Judah and the prophet Isaiah; in other words, in the eighth century BC.



Yivo

Avrom Mapu



Yivo

Ahavas Tsiyoyen (“Love of Zion”), the first Hebrew novel, published in Vilna in 1853. The author is cited as “Avrom, son of Yekusiel Mapu, a man of Kovna.”

Nationalism, Hebraism and Zionism

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The line of development from Haskalah to modern Hebrew, Jewish nationalism and Zionism is more or less a direct, unilinear pathway. The birth of political Zionism is of course traced to Theodor Herzl (1860—1904), a native of Budapest who moved on to Vienna. Its cultural core, however, emerged largely from Lithuania. The rise of a modern Hebrew literature in the hands of such figures as the Lebensohns, Gordon and Mapu was followed by a more overtly nationalistic phase. One of the chief proponents was Peretz Smolenskin (± 1840—1885), a native of Nastirshin (Monastyrshina, Mohilev province, now in Russia). After falling out with the Misnagdim of Shklov he moved on to the Hasidim of Lubavitch, whom he ended up rejecting even more forcefully. He found his life's calling in Odessa in the circle of the first modern Hebrew newspaper, *Ha-Méylits* ("The Advocate") in the 1860s. In 1868 he settled in Vienna where he founded the journal *Ha-Shákhár* ("Dawn") which became the most important Jewish nationalist journal in Europe. Smolenskin was a prolific writer himself, but much of his prose is overimpacted by his social, national, and polemic motives. A master of Hebrew style, he played an important role in developing the journal and polemic prose, both of which were to play a major role in the nationalist movement.

A popular postcard with
Smolenskin in the center



Although Hebrew had not been spoken as a vernacular for well over two thousand years, it had never died as a liturgical language, a language of texts that are intensively studied in the original, and perhaps most importantly, a language in which new works are always being written. As we have seen from the nature of Ashkenazic trilingualism (see p. 44), the same scholar who might write a work on Talmud or Kabbalah in Aramaic would write his correspondence and a Bible commentary in Hebrew, and of course, speak only Yiddish all day to family, friends and students. He might also write letters in Yiddish or a book intended for the popular audience of men and women. And women would usually write entirely in Yiddish. The upshot is that Hebrew was not only alive in many ways, but part of a unique Jewish linguistic system.

From this trilingualism, Lithuanian pioneers of modern Hebrew culture such as Ginzburg, the Lebensohns, Gordon, Mapu, Smolenskin and others were able to mold a dynamic new written language. But in a nineteenth century in which nobody spoke Hebrew, it took a proverbial *ayngeshparter Litvak* (“stubborn Litvak”) to start actually speaking Hebrew, first to his wife and child, and then to more and more people. That man, Leyzer Perlman, went on to become Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the reviver of modern spoken Hebrew.

Ben-Yehuda (1858—1922) was born into a family of Lubavitch Hasidim in the village Luzhik (northeast of Vilna province), and went on to study in nearby Polotsk and Glubók (all three towns are in today’s Belarus — Lužki, Polack and Htybokaje). Inspired by the struggle of the Balkan nations, and the various language-nationalisms throughout Europe, he became a determined “linguistic Zionist,” and propagated the idea that Jews needed to revive their ancient biblical tongue, Hebrew, as the spoken vernacular. This involved summoning up a massive (self) hate against Yiddish, the actual vernacular of the many millions of Eastern European Jews (and of course his own native language). He moved to Paris in 1878 and settled in Palestine in 1881, where he forced his wife, Deborah Jonas, to speak only Hebrew with him, in spite of the stresses thereby caused. Their son Ben-Zion is thought to be the first Hebrew speaking child in thousands of years. In 1891 his wife died of stress related illness, and Ben-Yehuda married her younger sister some six months later.

There are numerous anecdotes about Ben-Yehuda’s “fanaticism,” such as the story of the flooding of his home because he had not yet coined a Hebrew word for “faucet” and would not yell across that yard for the faucet to be shut off in any language but Hebrew. His own linguistic abilities and sense of determi-



Eliezer Ben-Yehuda

nation were vast. He compiled a multivolume Hebrew dictionary and coined innumerable terms for modern realia. But most importantly, he created in Jerusalem the first Hebrew speaking community in millennia.



Leyzer Ran Collection

Dvora Baron

Dvora (Deborah) Baron (1887—1956), a native of Uzde (Uzda, now in Belarus), was the first major woman writer in modern Hebrew literature. Born into a rabbinic family in 1887, she began to publish short stories at an early age. Many of her best loved stories focus on the Lithuanian shtetl, sometimes in near-poetic tones. She settled in Palestine in 1911, and went on to become a prominent author in Israel.



Leyzer Ran Collection

Vilna became a center of the *Khovevei Zion* (Hovevei Zion, "Lovers of Zion") movement from its inception. A group of its leaders in Vilna in the early 1880s.



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Leizer Ran Collection

Delegates from all over Lithuania at a
Zionist convention in Vilna in 1900



(From the book "The History of the Jewish People in Poland" by Dr. J. L. Kohn, published in 1911. The text is in Hebrew and discusses the role of Jewish educators in Vilna during the early 20th century.)



Leyzer Ram Collection

Hebrew educators in Vilna around the time of the First World War



Leyzer Ram Collection

A Zionist youth organization in Kovna (Kaunas) in 1904

ז. שניאור / הקמץ שטרנק

ביקנה



Menke Katz Collection



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Zalmen Shneur

Zalmen Shneur (1887—1959) was one of the major poets and novelists in his time, in both Hebrew and Yiddish. One of his most beloved contributions to Hebrew poetry is his poem *Yitna* (Israeli Hebrew *Yitna*), which appeared in this art edition (Berlin 1923) with the illustrations of German-Jewish artist Hermann Struck (1876—1944).



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Many leaders of the State of Israel, from its inception to the present, have been Litvaks. Chaim Weizmann (1874—1952), first president of the State of Israel, was a native of Miteke, a shtetl not far from Pinsk (now Motal, Belarus).



Yivo

Shimon Peres (born 1923), president of Israel from 2007, and previously prime minister and foreign minister, was born in Vishneve (now Vishnava, Belarus), not far from Vilezhin.

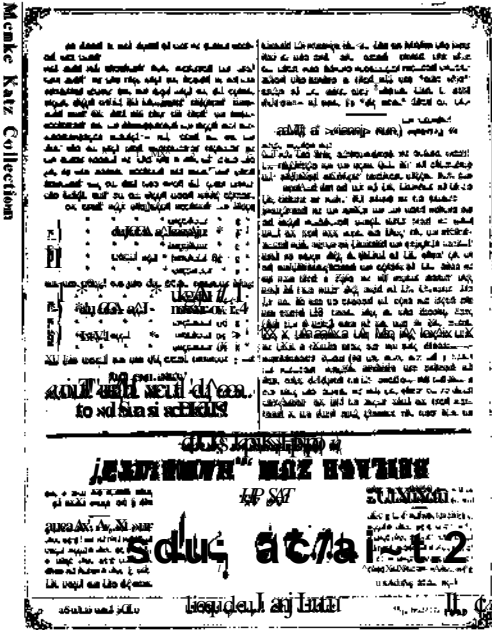
Yiddish Comes to Modern European Culture

Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (Sholem Jacob Abramowitz) was the founder of serious modern Yiddish literature, in the sense of literature as high art rather than just a (theoretical or ideological) means. There had been a serious Old Yiddish literature, as it is known to scholars in the field, on the territory of Moscovite Yiddish (German, Italy, Poland and neighboring countries) hundreds of years beforehand. And, in Eastern Europe, the Haskalah (Enlightenment) movement brought forth a spate of books in the early nineteenth century devoted to popular, modernizing, and political purposes of those early manifestos and polemics of modern Yiddish writers from Lithuania and Latvia, who did not write in Yiddish but in Russian and Polish.

It is to the diary of Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (1836—1917) to play a major role in the creation of a sophisticated modern Yiddish literature, both in its novels and short stories, and by inspiring others to the artistic potential of the Yiddish language.

Born in the shtetl Kaplitz in Minsk province (now Kopyl, Belarus), Abramovitch's life took an entirely different course after the sudden death of his father (Shimon-Kopyl, at the age of twenty-one, when the boy was thirteen). The home and studies at yeshivas in Shtetl and Vilna for a

Modern Yiddish literature is born.
 Yiddish literature began to be written in the late 18th century, but it was not until the 19th century that it became a serious literary movement.
 Yiddish literature was written in Yiddish, but it was not until the 19th century that it became a serious literary movement.
 Yiddish literature was written in Yiddish, but it was not until the 19th century that it became a serious literary movement.



Moshe Katz Collection



Zhitlovsky Foundation

The house where Mendele was born in Kapule, Minsk province (now Kopyl, Belarus), in (or around) 1836



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Mendele in the early 1860s, when he turned to Yiddish

number of years. Then he headed south to Ukraine, where he spent many years in Kamenits-Podolsk and other towns. His final home was Odessa, where he spent some thirty-six years, and where he died in the year of the Russian Revolution.

By meticulously choosing — and synthesizing — elements from his native Lithuanian Yiddish and the adopted Ukrainian Yiddish of his later years, he was able to forge, almost singlehandedly, the modern standard Yiddish literary language, whose essential elements remain firmly in place in the twenty-first century.

He had started out as a Hebrew didactic writer in the spirit of the Haskalah, concentrating on translations of works on the natural sciences as well as pieces of social and literary criticism. There are different versions of the story of his turn to Yiddish, the universal vernacular of East European Jewry. According to one version, he was “leaned on” by the first conscious Yiddishist, the Yiddish lexicographer Shiye-Mordechai Lifschitz (1829—1878), to “do something for the masses,” not just for the small male elite that could truly appreciate modern Hebrew prose. Using the pseudonym “Senderl” (diminutive of “Sender,” itself a Yiddish diminutive of “Alexander”), Abramovitch submitted his first Yiddish novel to the weekly Yiddish supplement, *Kol meváser* (“Voice that brings News”), published by the Odessa Hebrew magazine *Ha-Méylits* (“The Advocate”) in 1864. The editor, himself a major Haskalah figure, Alexander Tsederboym (Zederbaum) was afraid that readers would think *he* was dabbling in Yiddish fiction, because Senderl would be interpreted as the nom de plume of “Alexander” so *he* changed it to Mendele (diminutive of Mendl), and so it came to pass that *Méndeke Móykher Sforim* became the beloved and eternal pen name of this first great modern Yiddish writer.

Mendele Moykher Sforim means “Mendele the bookseller” and this is the persona adopted by Abramovitch in a number of works, a wandering Jewish bookseller who travels up and down the Pale of Settlement observing Jewish life and all its charms, complications and absurdities, weaving them into stories and novels with profound psychological and social insight. The power of Yiddish became an aspect inseparable from the art of the tale. Mendele’s Yiddish is remarkably rich, drawing on two major dialects (Lithuanian and Ukrainian), and also on the rich Slavic element in addition to the older Semitic and Germanic components of the language. Mendele molded



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Mendele in 1884, after settling down in Odessa



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Frontispiece of a popular edition of *Fishke der krumer* (“Fishke the lame”), one of Mendele’s most beloved works, first published in 1869. It is a tale of wandering Jewish beggars and soothsayers, inspired by a beggar, *Avreml der hinkediker* (“Avreml the limper”), who accompanied the future writer on his journey from Lithuania to “rich” Ukraine. Images of Fishke in his horse and wagon became a beloved motif for East European Jewish artists.

his Yiddish from the mouths of the shtetl Jews he met throughout his life, and refined it into a powerful literary instrument that boldly defied many of the stereotypes about Yiddish (for example that it had no vocabulary for nature).

It was the great Ukrainian Yiddish humorist Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovitch, 1859—1916) who dubbed Mendele the *zeyde* (“grandfather”) of Yiddish literature in the late 1880s, considering himself his literary *éynikl* (“grandchild”). The intermediate position in the romantics of Yiddish culture is assumed by the great Polish Yiddish master, Y. L. Peretz (1852—1915). Collectively, the three are known as the “triumvirate of modern Yiddish literature” or just as *di klásiker* (“the classicists.”) The period of the Yiddish classicists ends during the First World War when all three died (Peretz in Warsaw in 1915, Sholem Aleichem in New York in 1916 and Mendele in Odessa in 1917).



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Famous photo of the older Mendele



Menke Katz Collection

Mendele on his annual vacation to Podbródz (now Pabradė, Lithuania). In the 1920s and 1930s, students of the Vilna Yiddish Teachers’ Seminary would make an annual pilgrimage to the site where they would debate Mendele’s works as part of the holiday experience.

Some beloved Lithuanian Yiddish writers. . .



Leyzer Ran Collection

Isaac-Meir Dik

Here are just a few of the Litvaks who went on to become world famous Yiddish writers between the middle of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Isaac-Meir Dik (1814—1893) was perhaps the first popular modern Yiddish writer anywhere. For this native (and life-long) resident of Vilna it was no contradiction to be dedicated to the ideals of traditional Judaism and the best of the modern world. He was a classic *máskil* (Enlightenment advocate) in that he sought to use literature to inform, educate and improve the world around him, but unlike many others, he understood that without a compelling story line, the average reader is just not interested. For today's tastes, his tales are perhaps melodramatic and naive. But his readers loved them. In 1864, the same year that the great Mendele made his debut in Odessa, Dik signed a contract with the Romm publishing house in Vilna by which he was required to submit a forty-eight page mini-novel each week. And he did. Many of these weekly "Isaac-Meir Dik stories" were "read to pieces" and have been lost.

Shleyme-Zanvl Rapoport (1863—1920) with Chaim Zhitlovsky (1865—1943) in Vitebsk in 1882. The two young men would go on to dazzling careers in Yiddish culture. Rapoport, a native of Tshashnik (Čašniki, northeastern Belarus), who adopted the pseudonym An-ski (after his mother, Anna) is best known for his mystical play, *The Dybbuk*, first performed by the Vilna Troupe in 1920. In addition to his prolific literary output, he led an invaluable ethnographic expedition through the Ukraine in the years just prior to the First World War.



Yivo

An-ski (left) and Zhitlovsky
meeting in Vitebsk in 1882

Zhitlovsky, born in Ushátsh (Ušačy) near Vitebsk, went on to become the leading theoretician of Yiddishism, the belief that Yiddish language, literature and culture were absolute necessities to meaningful Jewish identity and cultural survival. He settled in the United States in 1908 and made enormous contributions as writer, teacher, speaker, theoretician and general sage to the pro-Yiddish elements of world Jewry.



Zhitlovsky Foundation

The famous image of Chaim Zhitlovsky in his American period

Shleyme Bloomgarten (1872—1927) was a native of Ver(zh)belov, later called Virbaln (now Virbalis, Lithuania). Although a major poet, he is best remembered for his complete translation of the Hebrew Bible into Yiddish. There had been Yiddish Bible translations for many centuries. In fact, two complete translations appeared almost simultaneously in Amsterdam in the late seventeenth century. But all the translations were written in special archaic (or consciously archaizing) forms of older Yiddish. In nineteenth century Eastern Europe, eastern versions of these very warm and folksy translations proliferated. But modern Yiddish culture felt the need for a literary translation that would in and of itself be a work of art. Bloomgarten, better known by his pen-name Yehóyesh (or Yehoash / Jehoash), a biblical name (see II Kings, chapters 12-14), spent much of his creative life working on his Yiddish Bible. He immersed

himself in ancient Hebrew philology, visited the holy land and spared no effort to seek philological accuracy alongside literary sophistication. At the same time he managed to keep a certain archaizing tendency which preserved the spirit of the hundreds of years of prior Yiddish Bible translations. Yehoyesh's Yiddish Bible is considered one of the masterpieces of modern Yiddish literature. He also mastered Arabic and translated classics of Arabic literature into Yiddish. From English he rendered into flowing Yiddish Longfellow's *Hiawatha*.



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Yehoyesh (Shleyme Bloomgarten)

Isidor Elyashev (1873—1924), a native of Kovna, is much better known by his pen name *Bal-Makhshóves* (Yiddish pronunciation of the Hebrew for “master of thoughts” or “someone who thinks a lot or profoundly”). He was a fine writer himself but his main achievement was the creation of serious Yiddish literary criticism. For all his love of Yiddish literature, Bal-Makhshóves held this new field to exacting standards, believing that the measuring rod of the great European nations should be applied without mercy. He had mastered Russian, German and French in addition to having a traditional yeshiva background. In fact, he studied at the experimental yeshiva at Grobin, Courland, which combined traditional learning with modern subjects (see the map of Lithuanian yeshivas, p. 147). He was moreover equally at home in Hebrew and Yiddish belles lettres. One of his best known essays is called “Two Languages, One Literature,” a far cry from the partisan Hebraists and Yiddishists who belittled the “other” language. In another penetrating essay, contrasting the views of the Jewish townlet or *shtetl* in the works of different authors, he laid the groundwork for a central issue in Yiddish literary studies, one that has become particularly contentious in the early twenty-first century.

A popular Bal-Makhshóves postcard



Menke Katz Collection



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Bal-Makhshóves (Isidor Elyashev)

Zalmen Shneur (1886—1959), a direct descendant of Shneur Zalmen of Lyadi, the founder of Chabad, the major branch of Lithuanian Hasidism, was perhaps the last great master of both Yiddish and Hebrew literature, and maybe the only one in either language to be deemed a roughly equal master of both prose and poetry. Some critics cut it in a more complementary way, considering his best poetry to be in Hebrew and his best prose in Yiddish. His creative world emanated largely from the Jewish past of Shklov, where he was born, and the interactions of that world with the new twentieth century of Europe, America and Israel. His life's wanderings took him from Shklov to Odessa (in 1900) where he befriended the great Hebrew poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik; Warsaw (in 1902); Vilna (in 1904), where his first major works were written; Switzerland (1905); Paris (1907); a "grand tour of Europe" (until 1913); Berlin (World War I years); Paris (1923). He escaped the Nazis to New York in 1940, and stayed there until 1951, when he moved to Israel.



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Zalmen Shneur

One of his best known Hebrew poetic works is *Vilno* (Vilna; see p. 239). In his later period, *Luchot genuzim* ("Hidden Tablets," 1949) attracted a lot of controversy because of its conflicts with traditional biblical history.

Among his most famous Yiddish novels are *Shklover yidn* ("Jews of Shklov," Vilna 1929); *Feter Zhame* ("Uncle Zhama," Vilna 1930); *Di meshumédeste* ("The Woman who Converted," New York 1948); *Der mamzer* ("The Bastard," New York 1957); *Noyakh Pandre* (Tel Aviv, 1956—1970).

Chaim Grade (1910—1982) was born in Vilna and spent a lot of his youth attending Lithuanian yeshivas (in Vilna, Olkenik, Byalistok and elsewhere). He became immersed in the the *muser* movement (see pp. 154-161). He followed up with secular education and by the early 1930s was an up-and-coming poet in the *Yung Vilne* group of writers. His *Másernikes*, published in 1939, is considered his best prewar work. He escaped to Russia, settled in Paris after the war, and resettled in New York at the end of the 1940s. In his later years, he was to become the undisputed Lithuanian Yiddish master of prose, rather than the poetry which had first made



Yivo

Chaim Grade



him famous. Still, his prose sparkles with the concise, precise and rhythmic qualities of his best poetry. His novels explore the destroyed traditional world of Lithuanian Jewry, particularly in the towns around Vilna. They often try to grope with the innermost depths of the clashes between that world and those influences of the modern outside world that were in constant tension with it. Among his beloved postwar works of prose are *Der mames shabósim* (“Mother’s Sabbaths”), 1955; *Di agúne* (“The woman who could not remarry”), 1961; and the epic two volume *Tsemakh Atlas*, also known as *The Yeshiva*, 1967. One of his most remarkable testaments to prewar Vilna is *Der shul-hoyf* (“The Synagogue Courtyard”), 1958, a collection of powerful stories set in and around the great synagogue courtyard of Vilna (see p. 114).

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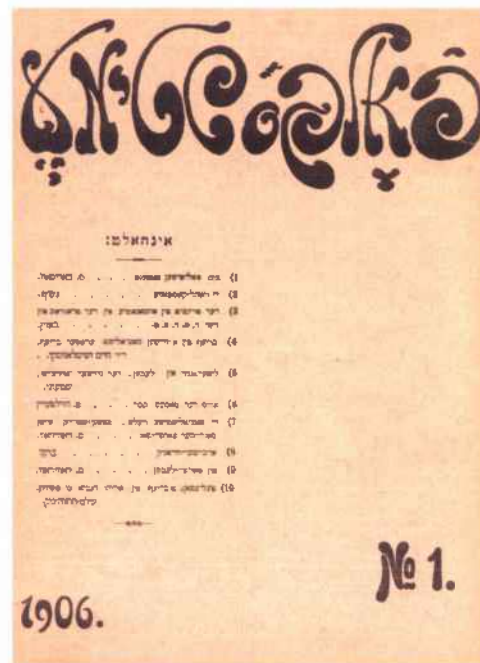
Like Chaim Grade, Avrom Sutzkever was a promising young poet in the *Yung Vilne* group in the 1930s. Sutzkever, who was born in Smargón in 1913, survived the Holocaust in the Vilna Ghetto and with the partisans in the forests. After escaping with the help of the Red Army to Moscow, he found his way to Israel after the war. There he gradually acquired the status of the world’s leading Yiddish poet. In 1949, he founded the *Goldene keyt*, a literary quarterly that quickly became acknowledged as the most prestigious Yiddish magazine. It appeared through the mid 1990s. His accomplishments played a visible role in the softening of the negative attitudes toward Yiddish on the part of the Israeli intelligentsia (see pp. 271-272).

Avrom Sutzkever. His 90th
birthday was celebrated in
2003

Vilna and Modern Yiddish Literature

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In the eighteenth century, Vilna became the undisputed world center of traditional rabbinic culture. In the nineteenth century, the city was the cradle of modern Hebrew literature. In the twentieth, it became one of several major international centers in the rise of Yiddish literature. The majority of Yiddish writers hailed from the much more populous south, but as usual, Jewish Lithuania and its spiritual capital, the “Jerusalem of Lithuania” played a role out of all proportion to size and population. Much of the infrastructure, especially high caliber prestigious journals, came from Vilna starting in the early years of the twentieth century.



Issue no. 1 (1906) of the *Folkshtime* (“Folk Voice”) which combined socialism with Yiddish literature. Only fourteen issues appeared. It was later revived in New York by its most prominent contributor, Dr. Chaim Zhitlovsky.



Yivo

Knoipa ("Buds"), a literary anthology "compiled by a group of young writers" in Vilna in 1911. Among the contributors was the great Yiddish poet of Grodna, Leyb Naidus (1890—1918).



Menke Katz Collection

Vilner zambikher ("Vilna Anthologies"), a series launched in 1916, was edited by the great physician and builder of Yiddish culture, Tséniakh Shabáel. Yiddish culture in Vilna was raised to new heights by this series, which actively helped to characterize needs and inspire the construction of the necessary infrastructure, including schools, courses and other institutions. It is a remarkable document, also, about the progress made during (and just after) the German occupation of World War I. Shabáel's *Vilner zambikher* serve to mark the end of the formative period of modern secular Yiddish culture in Vilna and the launch of a period of high sophistication that was to continue unabated throughout the interwar era.



Menke Katz Collection

Issue no. 1 of *In dypsa* ("In harness") which appeared in 1926. This journal published some of the world's most famous Yiddish authors.



Leizer Ran Collection

Mendele with Yiddish
writers in Vilna in 1909

Launching an era: the famous photo of Mendele Moykher Sforim, the “grandfather” of Yiddish literature (in the center of the photo) on a visit to Vilna in 1909 with some of the young Yiddish writers who lived in the city. Among them are: (bottom right) anti-modernist poet Dovid Einhorn who was born in Kórelitsh (now Kareliči, Belarus) in 1886 and died in New York in 1973; (middle row far right) the Yiddish educator Falk Halperin; (middle row far left) the great Yiddish scholar and Yivo leader Zelig Kalmanovitsh (born in Goldingen, Courland, now Kuldīga, Latvia, 1885; perished in the Holocaust, 1944); (back row, gentleman with the black beard) Yankl Zrubovl (Zerubavel), the Labor Zionist leader and Yiddish editor and later campaigner for the rights of Yiddish culture in Israel (1886—1967).

What is most sensational about the photo, however, is the presence of the Hebrew woman writer Dvora Baron (see p. 236), and her absence from a separate photo Mendele took with Vilna’s Hebrew Yiddish writers.

Mendele with Hebrew
writers in Vilna in 1909



Vivo

It was later revealed that the Hebrew writers did not feel comfortable being photographed with a woman writer. Dvora Baron was warmly welcomed by the Yiddishists however, and was photographed with writers from the “other language” at a time when the Hebrew-Yiddish controversy was raging. The sexual politics of these photographs and the period have been masterfully researched by Naomi Seidman (see bibliography at the end of this volume). Mendele, a master and founder of both literatures, was naturally claimed by both camps as their guru figure.

The leading Yiddish poet of 1920s Vilna was Meyshe (Moyshe, Moshe) Kulbak (1896—1940). A native of Smargón who had spent some years in Berlin, he was one of the young Yiddish masters who settled in Vilna at the end of the First World War. A beloved teacher and lecturer, he wrote “mystical poetic prose” (works such as *Meshíekh ben Efráyim*, “Messiah son of Ephraim”) and the master poems *Vilne* (“Vilna”) and *Raysn* (“Raysn” [Eastern Lithuania/Belorussia]). In 1928 he moved across the border and settled in Minsk, attracted by Soviet Yiddish literature of the time. He became one of the star young poets in the Minsk circle of Izzy Kharik, wrote a major novel, and enjoyed wide acclaim. It came crashing down with his arrest in 1937, along with the other great Yiddish writers in the Belorussian Republic. He was executed in 1937.



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Meyshe Kulbak



Leyzer Ran Collection

Some members of *Yung Vilne*, the young Yiddish writers group

Some of the members of *Yung Vilne*, the young Yiddish writers' and artists' union, founded in 1929. The group flourished until the Soviet occupation of 1940. Those of its members who survived the Holocaust went on to become leading Yiddish authors of the second half of the twentieth century (Chaim Grade, Shmerke Katsberginski, Avrom Sutzkever, Wolf Younin, Peretz Miransky, and others).

Yungvald, the union of the *youngest* Yiddish writers in Vilna. Hirsh Glik (1922—1944), at center bottom of this famous picture, was a native of the poor Shnipeshok suburbs, and became a beloved Yiddish poet. His poem *Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg* ("Never say you are walking the last road") was set to music and became the official hymn of the partisans fighting the Nazis in the forests around Vilna. Hirsh Glik himself perished in the Holocaust, in 1944, at the age of twenty-two. His *Zog nit keynmol* continues to be sung at Yiddish culture gatherings around the world.



Leyzer Ran Collection

Some members of *Yungvald*, the youngest Yiddish writers' group in Vilna



Menke Katz Collection

The young Avrom Sutzkever in Vilna. Sutzkever, born in Smargon in 1913, is considered to be a major Yiddish poet of the later twentieth century

The Vilna Yiddish Writers'
Union in 1938



Menke Katz Collection



Yivo

Yiddish poets Shmuel Katzberginski (left)
and Avrom Sutzkever in the Vilna ghetto.
Both survived the war. Katzberginski
perished in a plane crash in Argentina in
1954. Sutzkever celebrated his 90th
birthday in Tel Aviv in 2003.

The creation of a new literature entails more than the sum total of the number of writers. It has to exist as an idea in the public domain. Strange as it may sound a century later, the idea of “modern Yiddish literature” sounded quite ridiculous to many in the early twentieth century, sometimes even to those who were giving their lives to build it. It fell to one of the great scholars of interwar Vilna, Zalmen Reyzen (1887—±1940), to construct this modern literature in one fell swoop (albeit one that took many years of meticulous hard work, the kind of project usually carried out by well-endowed institutions rather than a single individual). Reyzen, a native of Koydenov (now Dziarżynsk, Belarus) was one of the famous “Reyzens (or Reisisins) of

Koydenov.” His brother was the great Yiddish poet Avrom Reyzen (see p. 264) and his sister was the Yiddish poet Sarah Reyzen (see p. 270). Zalmen Reyzen was primarily a Yiddish philologist and literary historian who settled in Vilna after the First World War, and was one of the prime builders of the Yivo. Reyzen was arrested by the Soviets after they occupied Vilna in September 1939, taken eastward and executed on a date still unknown.

Reyzen’s most eternal contribution is his massive four volume encyclopedia of Yiddish writers, which appeared in Vilna between 1926 and 1929. The most passionate supporters of Yiddish did not dream that the writing in this language had reached such proportions. The four volumes contain the biographies and bibliographies of nearly two thousand writers. All subsequent works are nearly wholly dependent on Reyzen’s for the period up to the late 1920s. Its formal title is *Leksikón fun der yidisher literatúr, prése un filolójye* (“Encyclopedia of Yiddish Literature, Press and Philology”). It quickly and permanently became known, simply, as “Reyzen’s *Leksikón*” (or just plain “Reyzen”). By giving Yiddish literature this sensational “statement,” Vilna became “the symbolic capital of Yiddish.”



Yivo

Zalmen Reyzen, master Yiddish literary historian, philologist and editor



The famous cover of Reyzen’s

Leksikón



A page of Reyzen’s *Leksikón*

Menke Katz Collection

Writers of the Labor Movement

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From the late nineteenth century onward, the Jewish labor movement served as a powerful impetus for the development and popularization of Yiddish literature. For one thing, virtually all Jewish workers, men and women alike, could read Yiddish. Mastery of literary Hebrew was the privilege of a small elite. For another, the universality of Yiddish fit the conceptual mode of the “people’s language” both ideologically and in a more spiritual and philosophical sense of “the language of the people” or “spirit of the folk.” Moreover, the Jewish labor movement in most of its incarnations foresaw the improvement of conditions in the places where Jews lived, unlike the Zionists who dreamt of building a new homeland in Turkish (later British) ruled Palestine. That meant developing “local” European Jewish culture, and that meant Yiddish.

Beyond the general impetus, the labor movement saw in Yiddish culture a powerful tool to spread its message among the masses. Haskalah advocates a generation and two earlier had seen the need to use Yiddish to spread their own message. But that was a reluctant concession, and now, the notion of the value of Yiddish in and of itself could become a fullhearted and ebullient enterprise. That meant, of course, a lot of propagandistic writing and publishing. But, again following the pattern of what had happened earlier in the context of modernizing movements, some writers were just too talented to remain “party line rhyme-sters” (or storytellers). Labor literature began to evolve as a serious art genre in the hands of gifted writers. Initially, nearly all were poets.

A group of mostly Lithuanian Jewish labor poets attained huge popularity both in Eastern Europe and in the emigration centers in England and North America. They are sometimes known as the “sweatshop poets” because they championed the poor, immigrant (not only Jewish) workers who were being mercilessly exploited by profit-hungry bosses in the sweatshops of London and New York and other places which attracted many East European Jewish immigrants.



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Morris Winchevsky

Morris Winchevsky (1856—1932) was the pen name of Ben-Tsiyen Novakhovitsh, a native of Yaneve (now Jonava, Lithuania). After moving to London, he became friendly with Henry M. Hyndman, a founder of British Socialism best known for his *England for All* (1881). Winchevsky worked hard as an editor and translator both in London, and then New York, where he moved in 1894. He became best loved for his own poetry. Some poems were set to music and were widely sung. One of the best known is “Three Sisters” about three impoverished sisters on London’s Leicester Square, one who sells flowers, one shoe-laces and one — herself.

Morris Rosenfeld (1862—1923) was born in a hamlet Baksha, not far from Suwalk (now Suwalki, Poland), and after a stay in Warsaw, the family moved to Suwalk. He too emigrated to London, and then on to New York. His vast output varied a lot in quality, but his role in getting Yiddish poetry up and running was widely acknowledged by those who surpassed him. Among his most beloved poems is *Mayn yingele* (“My little boy”), about a sweatshop father who almost never sees his son in the waking hours.



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Morris Rosenfeld



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Dovid Eydlshat

Dovid Eydlshat (1866—1892) was born deep in Russia into a Russian speaking environment, but came to love Yiddish as a boy as a result of his Lithuanian Jewish teacher. After some years in Kiev, he moved to the United States in the early 1880s, and was active in the anarchist movement, editing its well-known weekly, *Fraye arbeter shtime* (“Free Workers’ Voice”). He died at the age of twenty-six of tuberculosis and became almost a cult figure for the Jewish labor movement.

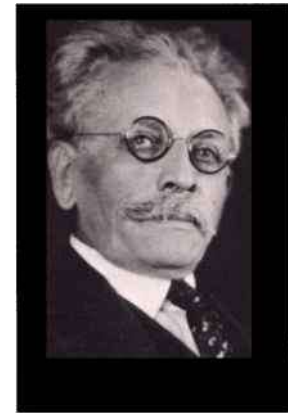
Abraham (Abe) Cahan was born in Pabrėžys (now Paberžė), near Vilna in 1860. As a young revolutionary in Vilna, he gave the pursuing czarist police the slip and turned up in New York in 1882. He mastered English quickly while working in a cigar factory, and soon went on to lecture and write in the language. In 1917 he even published an English novel of note (*The Rise of David Levinsky*).

Cahan nevertheless turned to Yiddish for his life's project. In 1897 he cofounded the *Forverts*, or Jewish Daily Forward, history's most successful Yiddish newspaper. At its peak around World War I, it had about two hundred thousand readers. As the various leftist movements underwent differentiation over the years, based mostly on attitudes toward the Russian Revolution and Soviet communism, Cahan became a staunch anti-communist and advocate of peaceful democratic socialism and unionism, placing his powerful newspaper in the mainstream of the immigrant community.

The Yiddish intelligentsia often looked down at Cahan's preference for popular mass culture, his desire to integrate the immigrants into American life and his consequent use of a watered-down Americanized Yiddish. Nevertheless his literary pages helped make the careers of a number of great writers, including Sholem Ash (1880—1957), Israel Joshua Singer (1893—1944), and his brother Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904—1991), the only Yiddish author to win the Nobel Prize for literature (in 1978, when he picked up the prize in Stockholm accompanied by beaming *Forward* editors).

Cahan maintained an iron grip on the paper during his long life. He died a month after his ninety-first birthday in 1951.

With the decline of socialism as a mainstream force in many western countries, its Yiddish press and literature also faded. But the *Forward*, unlike other Yiddish newspapers with a private owner, had been run as a collective (the Forward Association), with profits from "the good years" duly reinvested, leaving an endowment which is now used to publish the *Forverts* as a general interest weekly Yiddish newspaper. Toward the end of the twentieth century, the Forward Association launched separate English and Russian weeklies. In a sense then, Abe Cahan's legacy left the twenty-first century with three Jewish weeklies. In three languages.



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Abe Cahan, mighty
editor of the Jewish Daily
Forward

In America

America had caught bits and pieces of the East European Jewish imagination from the early nineteenth century onward. Histories of the new land were among the earliest didactic books reworked into Hebrew or Yiddish. One of them was published in Yiddish in 1824 by the pioneering Hebrew writer, Mordechai-Aaron

Ginzburg of Salánt (1795—1846, see p. 233). Literary historians think that this, his only publication in Yiddish, was undertaken to recoup the losses incurred from the Hebrew edition, which appeared in Vilna a year earlier. Stories of *Kolumbus's medine* (“Columbus’s Land”) were verily bestsellers. The most popular name for the United States came to be *di góldene medine* (“the golden land”).

Some decades later, imagination turned into reality for millions of East European Jews, from the Pale of Settlement area of the Russian Empire (which included all of Lita; see map p. 300), as well as Galicia (in the Austro-Hungarian or Habsburg Empire).

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Mordechai Aaron Ginzburg's
Yiddish version of *The Discovery
of America* (Vilna 1824)

Between 1881, the year of the first pogroms in the Russian Empire (in the wake of the assassination of czar Alexander II), and 1914 (the year the First World War broke out), nearly two and a half million East European Jews emigrated to America. It is scarcely a surprise that New York City, where the Jewish population stood at just over two million in 1937, became the world center of Yiddish literature for some decades.

Actually, it was one particular neighborhood in New York, the Lower East Side, that became the international center of Yiddish belles lettres. To envisage the process, think of newcomers, just off the boat, most of whom hailed from this or that bucolic shtetl with its special characteristics (see pp. 190-195), arriving in one of the world's most densely populated metropolises. The sheer contrast of civilizations was awesome, and for those who took to the pen, the dramatic disparity itself often became a major theme.

The Lower East Side of New York City:
Orchard Street (corner of Rivington),
early 20th century



Richard E. Shepard

As in many other branches of Jewish culture, Litvaks played a part disproportionate to their percentage of the immigrant population. In many cases, they were the editors, educators and builders of the infrastructure of modern Yiddish literature in the United States and Canada. The story of the most powerful Yiddish editor of all time, Abe Cahan (see p. 260), can be seen as one of passage from editing a “socialist movement organ” to one that concentrates on serving a wider, general readership and giving it the best of the modern literature created in its own language. Another example is editor, scholar and educator Kalmen Marmor (1876—1956) who became head of the Jewish Workers’ University in New York in 1936, where he educated a whole generation of young immigrant Yiddish writers, many of whom were to become Yiddish teachers (thanks to Marmor) to earn a living. Marmor was a native of Meyshegole (now Maišagala, Lithuania).

The old East European northern (Litvak) vs. southern (non-Litvak) divide, so powerful in dialect, culture and folklore, was somewhat lightheartedly reformulated in America as the “Litvak vs. Galitsyaner” divide. In some popular Litvak usage, all non-Litvaks were folkloristically lumped together as “Galitsyaner” (hailing from Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire), even if they came from Congress Poland, Ukraine, Hungary or other southern, non-Lithuanian, regions. Accurate or inaccurate, folklore works its way into popular culture, and this was to be no exception. In America, these distinctions became somewhat vaudevillized.

Popular music on the
“Litvak vs. Galitsyaner”
theme



Rikhard F. Shepard



Richard F. Shepard

Elyokem Tsunzer in
1895 (by photographer
A. Smith of 42-44 Canal
Street)

Turning from popular to high literary Yiddish culture, writers from Lita have been prominent in American Yiddish literature from its inception to this day. For most of them, their native land remained a central motif throughout their creative lives.

One of the first was Elyokem Tsunzer (Eliakum Zunser). Born in Vilna in 1836, he came to be known as one of the greatest *badkhönim* (wedding jesters, spontaneous rhymesters) of Lithuania. After he came under the influence of the *Muser* movement (see pp. 154-161), his work grew more serious and literary, and less occasion-oriented. After losing his seven children and his wife in the cholera epidemic of the early 1870s, his writing was again jolted to more serious themes of human existence. In 1889 he emigrated to New York where he lived until his death in 1913. In New York he became a beloved personality on New York's Lower East Side. Immigrants would flock to him to write verse on this or that occasion. His more serious work blossomed as well.

Avrom Reyzen (Abraham Reisin) was one of America's leading Yiddish poets and short story writers. He was born in 1876 in Koydenov (now Dzierżynsk, Belarus), and became the most famous of one of the "first families of Yiddish culture" — the Reyzens of Koydenov. His brother was the great Yiddish philologist and literary historian Zalmen Reyzen (Raizin, see pp. 256-257), and his sister was the fine poet Sora (Sarah) Reyzen (see p. 270). Their father, Kalmen, wrote verse in Hebrew and Yiddish. Avrom Reyzen settled in New York in 1914 where his huge output served to "slowly but surely" lift popular Yiddish verse and shorter fiction to the level of true art. He died in New York in 1953.



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Avrom Reyzen

H. Leivick (Leyvik) was the pen name of Leyvik Halpern. Born in Ihumen (now Červen, Belarus) in 1886, Leyvik as a youth devoted himself to poetry as a means to bring about a better world. His revolutionary activities as a member of the Jewish Labor Bund got him arrested by czarist authorities. His second arrest in 1906 resulted in detention, a sentence of hard labor and lifelong banishment to Siberia. He escaped in 1913 and made his way to America where he earned a living as a wallpaper hanger. He became one of the most profound Yiddish poets ever, with the theme of human suffering frequently paramount. The content and framework often came from the imaginary world of ancient and medieval Jewish sources. The universalist poetic conception of suffering, never far from his own years in czarist prisons, is at once transcendent of that experience, enabling it to become the poet's key to his vision of the suffering inherent in human spiritual history. In addition to his poems, he is well known for his poetic dramas, particularly *The Golem* (*Der goylem*, 1921), based on the famous legend that the Maharál of Prague (Yehude-Leyb ben Betsalel, ± 1525—1609) created a human-made being, a *golem* (sometimes called a “homunculus”) to come to the rescue of Prague's Jewry.



Zhitlovsky Foundation

H. Leivick

Alexander Pomerantz (1901—1965) was one of the “young poets of Grodna” in the late teens of the twentieth century. The group centered around the inspirational figure of Leyb Naidus, whose Yiddish verse touched cords of love of nature and lyrical sensuality that were highly innovative for Yiddish poetry at the time. Naidus's death in 1918, at the age of twenty-eight, brought an end to the circle. Pomerantz left for America in 1920. His own poetry boldly synthesized imagery from the Talmud and Kabbalah (he had been a student at the great yeshiva of Mir) with revolutionary moods inspired by leftist circles. In America he was among the founders of the leftwing poet's group *Proletpén* in the 1920s. He inspired a circle of talented young poets in New York and published their work in his *Yung kúznye* (“Young Forge”) magazine. In 1925, he teamed up with visiting Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky to produce the trilingual *Sparták*, which became a rarified turning point in modern Yiddish writing in America. In the 1930s, he spent a few years in Kiev writing a dissertation on the American Yiddish poetry he had helped create. In the 1950s, when the truth came out about the Stalin regime's murder of the great Soviet Yiddish writers, he was among the first to come out with the truth, publicly breaking ranks with the left. In other words, the same personality who helped create far-left American Yiddish poetry in the 1920s, led it away from its false (Soviet) political gods three decades later. His last major work, a scrupulously researched book about the murdered writers, appeared in 1962.



Menke Katz Collection

Alexander Pomerantz



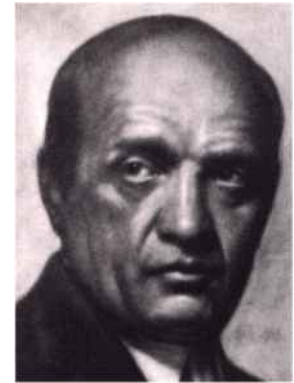
Menke Katz Collection

Yosl Grinshpan

Yosl Grinshpan was born in Kletsk in 1902. His poetry was often considered the best of the young poets in New York in the late 1920s and early 1930s. What seemed like a meteoric career was cut short by his death, at the age of thirty-two, of illness related to the hunger and homelessness suffered during the Great Depression in the United States. A collection of his work appeared in 1937.

Avrom-Moyshe Dillon, who was born in Zhetl (now Dziatlava, Belarus) in 1883, emigrated to America in 1904. He became known as the “poet of sadness” who was able to elevate pessimistic moods to heights of lyrical beauty. He was a bachelor poet who wrote love poems to real and imagined lovers. His best known book was his 1919 *Géle bléter* (“Yellow Leaves”), which was published in 1919 in calligraphic script. Its persona is a wondrous poet carrying yellow leaves in a beggar’s sack, frightening everyone around him. He died in New York in 1934, in the midst of the severe poverty of the Depression.

Chaim Grade (1910—1982) is considered, along with Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904—1991), to be one of the two greatest prose writers of post-Holocaust Yiddish literature. Grade, born into a poor family in Vilna, studied in a number of yeshivas in the Vilna area and for a time was engrossed in the *Muser* movement (see pp. 154-161). In the 1930s he emerged as one of the most talented poets in the *Yung Vilne* group. There were few among the secular Yiddish writers who were as steeped as he in the depths of the yeshiva world. He escaped to Russia during the Holocaust, and after some years in Paris after the war, settled in New York in the late 1940s. It was in his later period, in New York, that the former young poet emerged as the superb prose writer. Among his masterpieces are *Der Shul-heyf* (1958), a collection of novellas set in the Great Vilna Synagogue Courtyard (see p. 114), and *Tsemakh Atlas*, a two volume epic set in yeshivas and towns of the interwar Vilna area (New York, 1967-1968). Chaim Grade is considered to be one of the greatest Yiddish writers of all time.



Menke Katz Collection

Avrom-Moyshe Dillon



Yivo

Chaim Grade



Menke Katz Collection

Leyzer Ran on a visit to Oxford University

Leyzer Ran (1912—1995), a native of Vilna, was a student at the Yivo (Yiddish Scientific Institute) and a contributor to many Yiddish publications. He relocated to Moscow to study in 1936, and soon fell victim to the purges. He was sent to Soviet labor camps where he spent the war years. Afterwards he migrated to Havana, Cuba, and eventually to New York City where he became “Mr. Vilna,” dedicating his life to the preservation of the memory of the city he called “the capital of Yiddish.” Though he penned numerous studies, and worked on various archives, he will forever be remembered best for his masterpiece, *Jerusalem of Lithuania*. The work comprises two huge folio volumes of photos of prewar Vilna with text in four languages (Yiddish, English, Hebrew and Russian), with a number of learned introductions. The third, smaller volume contains the indexes and keys. In his *Jerusalem of Lithuania* (New York, 1974), Leyzer Ran not only created a visual and multilingual monument to a Yiddish civilization that was destroyed in the Holocaust; he established, perhaps for one occasion only, the genre of the photo collection book as literary masterwork.

Menke Katz, who emigrated to America as a boy of fourteen in 1920, was the only Yiddish poet to become a major poet in English as well. He wrote eighteen books of verse in his lifetime, nine in Yiddish, and nine in English. His first book, *Dray shvester* (“Three Sisters”), which appeared in 1932, was an erotic and mystical drama in four acts. His famous *Bréndik shtetl* (“Burning Village”) appeared in 1938. It is a two-volume epic focused on his Lithuanian villages, Michaleshik (now Mikhalishki, Belarus) and Svintsyan (now Švenčionys, Lithuania), during World War I. After it was attacked by the leftist literary establishment for its love of the Lithuanian Jewish shtetl, and its failure to support “socialist ideals” the author responded with his most intriguing work, *S’hot dos vort mayn Bobe Moyne* (“Grandmother Mona takes the Floor”), in which his Lithuanian grandmother rises from her grave in the poet’s dreams and answers the critics in her own voice. Much of Menke Katz’s English work was also focused on his Lithuanian villages, which became well known in American poetry circles. In 1978 he moved to a forest house upstate New York to be in an environment reminiscent of his Lithuanian childhood.



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Menke Katz near his forest house

Litvak women poets

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Modern Hebrew literature and Yiddish fiction were largely male dominated enterprises. Yiddish poetry became the first major “breakthrough” area of literary creativity for young women writers from the former Pale of Settlement who relocated abroad, mostly to North America. Many of the women who built Yiddish poetry in the west were Litvaks. The appropriate study and translation of their work — and that of Yiddish women poets generally — remains a key desideratum of Yiddish literary studies in our time.



Zelde Knizhnik
Viazn, 1869 — New York



Anna Rapport
Kosna, 1876 — New York



Berta Kling
Navaredok 1884 — New York



Ayda (Ida) Tils
Demlevitsh 1888 — Los
Angeles 1955



Rivke Galin
Lekhevitch 1890 — New York
1935



Freydl (Freydl Sosonkin) Blum
Blumen 1894 — Menton,
France 1938



Ieye Kopelevitsh Hofman
Tivan 1898 — Los Angeles 1952



Yudika (Yehudis) Tsik
Gorzhd 1898 — New York 1987



Esther Shumyatsher
Gomel 1899 — New York 1985



Ana Blokh
Mir 1901 — Johannesburg



Libe Burshtin
Sokole 1901 — New York 1940



Roza Gutman (Yasni)
Kovna 1903 — New York



Eyde (Zhukofsky) Maze
Ugle (near Kapule) 1893 —
Montreal 1962



Shifre Vays (Shifra Weiss)
Kelem 1899 — Los Angeles 1955



Sarah Reyzen (Reisin)
Koydenov 1885 — New York
1974

IMAGES: EZRA KORMAN'S
ANTHOLOGY *YIDISHE
DIKHTERINS* (CHICAGO 1928)

In Israel

For many decades, the attitude toward Yiddish in Israel was harshly negative. The government, press and various groups of intellectuals (including writers and scholars) and the educated (including teachers and professionals) disclaimed the “hated jargon of the Diaspora” and feared its survival would endanger the stabilization of the artificially revived modern Hebrew which is the language of the state. Yiddish language and culture became the objects of a smear campaign asserting that they do not represent “serious” culture but at best a vaudeville tradition usable for jokes and hilarious ditties. It was asserted moreover that Yiddish itself “stands for” diaspora and humiliation, while Hebrew represents the proud new settler in the ancestral homeland.

In this environment it was not easy for serious Yiddish culture to flourish. On top of all the “attitudes” came a government sponsored campaign of harassment. Various laws were invoked to make it impossible for a Yiddish daily to appear. In the most famous instance this was thwarted by master editor Mordechai Tsanin (1906 — 2009), a Polish Jew who “divided” his newspaper using different names on different days of the week. For decades, Yiddish writers’ meetings, and kiosks selling Yiddish periodicals were even firebombed, and writers beaten up. Such was the hate of Yiddish.

In spite of this harshly negative environment, a small band of talented Yiddish writers flourished, all of them fiercely loyal to Israel, to the idea of the Jewish homeland and its secure future, in spite of their dissenting views on the question of rights for Yiddish. They can be divided into two groups, historically speaking. There were prominent Litvaks in each of them. The best known “three Litvaks” among Israel’s Yiddish cultural leaders are sometimes referred to as *di dray Avrómen* (“the three Abrahams”).

The first group comprised settlers of the 1920s and 1930s who arrived in Palestine years before the establishment of the state in 1948. Many hailed

from the *linke Páley Tsyen* (left-wing Poale Zion movement), which was, unusually, Zionist and pro-Yiddish, a heritage going back to the founder of Labor Zionism, who was also the founder of modern Yiddish philology, Ber Borokhov (see pp. 283-284).

Among the most beloved was Avrom Lis (1913—1998) of Bialistok, who arrived in Tel Aviv in 1936. He had already become known as a young writer in Bialistok. He evolved into a major literary critic, historian and essayist, and was among the leaders of the Yiddish Writers' Union in Israel for many decades. In later years, he founded and to the end of his days vigorously directed Tel Aviv's Sholem Aleichem House, which became a center for living Yiddish culture. He wrote and edited many books on the great Yiddish humorist Sholem Aleichem.



Menke Katz Collection

Avrom Lis lecturing
to a standing-room-only
audience at Oxford
University (1987)

1949 settled in Israel where he became administrator of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Over the years he developed as a master Yiddish short story writer. The setting for most of his books is interwar Vilna. His works recreate the rich Jewish milieu of the city, including the socially “lowest” elements of society.



Vilnius Yiddish Institute

Avrom Karpinovitsh returns to his
native Vilna to lecture at the
Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius
University (2001)

Avrom Sutzkever, who was born in Smargón in 1913, was considered the leading Yiddish poet in the late twentieth century. He settled in Vilna in 1920. In his mid twenties he won recognition as a rising young star of Yiddish poetry internationally, and in the 1930s became a major figure in the *Yung Vilne* (Young Vilna) group of Yiddish writers and artists (see p. 255). He was incarcerated in the Vilna Ghetto, escaped to join the partisans and was spectacularly rescued by the Russians. After stints in Moscow and Paris, he settled in Israel in 1947. Two years later he launched *Di goldene keyt* ("The Golden Chain"), a Yiddish quarterly which quickly became the world's leading journal for serious Yiddish literature. It was published until 1995.



David Katz

Avrom Sutzkever

Among Soviet Yiddish Writers

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Soviet Yiddish literature experienced a meteoric rise starting in 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution. For a few short years, in the mid to late twenties, it seemed to many (especially from the outside), that *ganéyd* (“the Garden of Eden”) for Yiddish had been set up. Yiddish writers were paid salaries and their works published, all with government funding! They did not have to work at menial tasks to earn their bread, nor feel inferior to those writing in the world’s powerful languages. Some young masters from other countries, such as Meyshe Kulbak, then in Vilna (see p. 254), migrated to “paradise found.”

It was of course, not to last. The party’s meddling in the content and form of literature, from the late 1920s, was followed in the 1930s by forced apologies, and then, purges, arrests, deportations and mass murder by an ever more paranoid Stalinist regime. Many were arrested in 1937 and murdered that year or slightly later. The surviving leading personalities of Soviet Yiddish literature were murdered on August 12th 1952.

Most of the greats of Soviet Yiddish literature were from the Ukraine. Still, there were a number of leading Litvaks.

One was poet Izzy Kharik. He was born in 1898 in Zemin (colloquially *Zhebm*), served in the new Red Army during the Russian Revolution and became a devout communist. Derailed as it was by the political correctness of his time and place, his poetry excelled in its folklike quality, genuine idiomatic flavor and the sheer power of simplicity. After studying literature in Moscow, he returned to Belorussia to become the undisputed (and very young) king of the Yiddish writers of Minsk. He edited the powerful monthly, *Der shtern* (“The Star”) and won wide acclaim for his own collections of Yiddish verse. In 1935, still in his mid thirties, he was ac-



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Izzy Kharik

corded a personal festschrift for services to Yiddish literature and to the Soviet Union. After his sudden arrest in June 1937 by Stalin's police (he was sure it was some kind of misunderstanding), he was tortured in various camps before being subjected to a horrific death later the same year. His widow, Dina Kharika was sent to hard labor for decades. In the early twenty-first century, deep in old age, she was running the Izzy Kharik Yiddish Library in Minsk, Belarus.

Zelik Akselrod (Selig Axelrod) was "different." Born in 1904 in Maladétskne (between Vilna and Minsk, now Maladzečna, Belarus), he began to publish at a very young age, in 1921, and won wide acclaim from "readers and foreigners" while being viewed with suspicion by Soviet powers for his failure to join the party or put his poetry to its service. After a stint in Moscow he settled in Minsk where he worked for the government's Yiddish publishing projects, editing, translating, and publishing his own work as far as possible. After the Soviet Union's annexation of what had been Eastern Poland in September 1939 (incorporating the northern region into Lithuania and the Belorussian SSR, and the southern into the Ukrainian SSR), Akselrod visited Bialystok and married the daughter of the famous Polish Yiddish writer, Itshe-Mayer Vaysnberg (1881—1938), who had then recently died. Akselrod went on to visit Vilna shortly after Lithuania was forcibly made into a Soviet Republic in 1940, and befriended the circle of Vilna writers (enlarged at the time by refugees from Nazi occupied Poland).

On more than one occasion in those years he made the "fateful mistake" of speaking his mind. According to the report of Vilna Yiddish writer Shmerke Katsherginski (see p. 255), Akselrod protested at a meeting in Vilna when told that the Soviets had decided to close the Yiddish newspaper they had set up there. His remarks were reported. He also disagreed with the policy of the official Union of Yiddish Writers in Belorussia at a May 1941 meeting in Minsk. After these incidents he was arrested, and shot in prison on June 26th 1941, two days before Minsk was overrun by the Nazis. An eyewitness reported that he was shot in the back, yelling out as he fell to the ground: *Máme! Oy, Rebéyne-sheféylem!* ("Mama! O dear God" using a traditional religious name for God which translates as "master of the universe").



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Zelik Akselrod

Shmuel Halkin was born in 1897 in Rógetshov, not far from Mohilev, in the east of historic Lita (now Rahačou, Belarus). He grew up in a home steeped in Lithuanian Hasidism and began his poetic work in Hebrew, drawing inspiration from the medieval Sephardic (Spanish) Hebrew poets. After the banning of Hebrew literature in the Soviet Union he turned to Yiddish, but was repeatedly attacked for “Jewish nationalism,” a charge deriving from his love of ancient Jewish themes. His 1929 collection of poems, *Vey un mut* (“Woe and Courage”), for example, led to a stream of relentless attacks, mocking the author’s ties to his religion and heritage and to allegedly bourgeois values.

His most famous works were written after the Holocaust, during an interlude in which Soviet repression briefly allowed Jewish thematics following the great catastrophe. These include a poetic drama about the Warsaw Ghetto, *Af toyt un af lebn* (“On Death and on Life”). He was also well known for his Yiddish reworkings of classics by Shakespeare and Pushkin.

Halkin was arrested in the late 1940s during Stalin’s last great purge of Yiddish writers. He was released in 1955, rehabilitated in 1958, and died in 1960. His last famous poem, written after his imprisonment, was called *The Confessions of Socrates*.



Zhitovsky Foundation

Shmuel Halkin

Educators

Modern education on western models, for both Jewish and general studies, was built by an array of Jewish educators throughout Eastern Europe from the late nineteenth century onward. The cultural, political and religious orientations varied widely. Among the popular combinations were (modern) religious + Hebrew, (traditional) religious + Yiddish, secular + Yiddish, secular + Hebrew. Many had an ideological agenda, including the prominent types Zionist + Hebrew or Socialist + Yiddish but even here there were variations and gradations.

What characterized them all was the ideal of developing schools that would be modern in two senses. First, in the construction of curriculum divided by subjects and fixed time periods, and the insistence on teachers with formal institutional qualifications in their subjects. Second, these were to be schools that would include general subjects in addition to whatever selection of Jewish subjects was offered. Both Hebrew and Yiddish rapidly developed vocabulary for an array of subjects that had not been taught before in the traditional *kheyder* (*heder*) at the elementary level or the traditional yeshiva at higher levels.

Vilna played a leading role in the development of modern Jewish education, and the city produced (and drew) hundreds of modern educators between the late nineteenth century and the onset of World War II.

Dveyre Kupershteyn (Deborah Cooperstein) and Sofia Gurevitsh both became legendary in the popular psyche for their elevation of Yiddish to a language of top quality formal modern education.



Leyzer Ran Collection

Dveyre Kupershteyn

Dveyre Kupershteyn (1854—1939) founded a four-grade Russian elementary school for Jewish girls in 1912. It quickly won acclaim. In 1920 she took the bold (and, it turned out to be, inspirational) step of “unilaterally” converting her school to one in which everything would be taught in Yiddish. It was no mean feat convincing parents and the wider public that it was possible “at once” to switch to Yiddish as the language of instruction and remain academically first rate; Yiddish did not, after all, have a long tradition as the medium of western type schools. Her school, to which she devoted herself entirely, even after her sight failed, became famous, and its girls went on to many fine careers in Vilna and abroad. In 1927 it expanded to eight grades and was incorporated into the “Ise Be Ka” secular Yiddish school system. The initials stand for *Tsentráler bíldungs komité*t (“Central Education Committee”). Everyone continued to call the school *Di Dveyre Kupershteyn shul*. Three hundred and five students were enrolled in the 1929/1930 school year.

While Kupershteyn and others were constructing the new network of Yiddish elementary schools in Vilna and its region, Sofia Gurevitsh (1880—1942) led the way in creating new secondary schools (*gimnazyes*) where the teaching would be in Yiddish and the level high. The most prestigious of the Vilna Yiddish *gimnazyes* was in fact hers. It became known as the Sofia Gurevitsh Gimnazye. Gurevitsh, a native of Minsk, had been a teacher in Russian schools in the Vitebsk area, and studied pedagogics and the natural sciences in St. Petersburg. She settled in Vilna in 1905 and began teaching in various of the Yiddish schools arising in those years. In 1906, she opened a private secondary school for girls which grew in stature each year. During the First World War, she founded a number of schools for the deportees in Russia, and returned in 1918 to Vilna, and to her private secondary school, which became coeducational.

The difficulties in finding top faculty who could teach in Yiddish at the secondary level was solved by Gurevitsh’s astounding success in attracting talented teachers from other countries. Two of the teachers, Hrushovski and Fain, were brought from Ukraine. Their children, who attended the *gimnazye*, are today’s Yale Professor Benjamin Harshav and New York’s artist Yonia Fain (see pp. 298 and 352).

Sofia Gurevitsh herself became a victim of the Polish authorities’ crackdown on Yiddish education in the 1930s. After being banned from educational work, she migrated to the Soviet Union, where she died brokenhearted, in Gorki, in 1942.



Yonia and Hellen Fain (N.Y.)

Sofia Gurevitsh

Modern Yiddish Scholarship

The rapid rise of modern Yiddish literature in the later nineteenth century demonstrates for some that elaborate “high culture” can emerge dramatically, even in the absence of an explicit native scholarly tradition that is focused on the language in which that culture is being created. First comes the art, and only then the savants. Linguistics and philology came to be the central elements of the specific new “scholarship of East European Jewry.” History, literary history, cultural history, folklore, sociology and various other disciplines were also developed. Many of the founders, shakers and movers were Litvaks.

The Harkavys of Navaredok (Novogrudok, now Navahradak, Belarus) were a renowned family that produced a number of scholars. They were descended from the great Rabbi Mordechai Yofe, and related by marriage to another “first family” of Litvaks, the Romms of Vilna (see p. 187). Abraham Elijah Harkavy (1835—1919) was a famous cultural historian who delved into the origins of East European Jewry, synthesizing his vast knowledge in Oriental and Slavic studies. His work was still in the frame of mind of a kind of apologetics, trying to prove an ancient Slavic heritage in support of the noble motive of improving the image of Jews in the eyes of the Russian state. It was a second Harkavy who was to make a radical new beginning toward an internal scholarship based on the recognition of the inherent worth of one’s own language and culture.

He was the beloved Yiddish lexicographer Alexander Harkavy (1863—1939), whose brief study on the Yiddish language, which he wrote in Hebrew during a stay in Paris in 1885, launched a remarkable career, and can be seen as a kind of harbinger of the new field of Yiddish studies.



Menke Katz Collection

Alexander Harkavy

He moved from Naváredok to Vilna in 1878 and to the United States in 1882. He became known in America as the compiler of many English-Yiddish and Yiddish-English dictionaries. The work that has best withstood the tests of time is his 1925 *Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary*, revised in 1928. It was reissued by the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in 1988 with further reprints still in press. To this day, it remains the best dictionary for students in the English (and Hebrew) speaking worlds who seek to come to grips with the masters of Yiddish literature.

Harkavy is also a modern Yiddish legend. He was known as a warm, folksy fellow who helped thousands of poor immigrants on New York's Lower East Side. He would never say no, whether somebody asked him to help write a letter in good Yiddish or to help prepare for an examination in English. But the aura of legend comes from the story of his marriage. One day, walking across the Brooklyn Bridge he saw a beautiful young woman jump into the river and try to kill herself. The shipmen on a passing boat rescued her. Harkavy, the proverbial Litvak who "has to get to the bottom of everything," followed her to the hospital. When she regained consciousness he asked why she had jumped into the river. She replied, in Yiddish of course, that her intended bridegroom had written from Europe to say that he would marry someone else back home and not come to America for her. "For this you throw yourself into the river?" Harkavy asked angrily, and continued: "For God's sake, I'll marry you!" She was left badly crippled by the jump, but Alexander and Bella Harkavy lived happily together for the rest of their lives.

Simon Dubnov (1860—1941) was probably the greatest Jewish historian of all time. His ten volume *World History of the Jewish People* remains a classic. He was among the first to properly appreciate the paramount importance of the multifaceted Jewish culture of Eastern Europe (an intellectual response to the German-Jewish historians who looked down upon the "Ostjuden"). He was also among the first to meaningfully incorporate cultural, sociological and literary studies in the telling of Jewish history. Dubnov was a "cultural nationalist" who believed that cultural autonomy could work in Eastern Europe. A native of Amtshislav (now Mscislaŭ, Belarus), he lived in St. Petersburg, Odessa, and Vilna. Disdaining communism, he left Russia in 1922 for



Yivo

Simon Dubnov

Berlin. When Hitler came to power, he moved to Riga, in 1933, where he continued his research and writing at a frantic pace. At the age of eighty-one, he was murdered by a Gestapo officer (on December 8th 1941). Although his major works are in other languages, Dubnov did pen a number of major studies in Yiddish. The participation of a scholar of his stature helped elevate the level of the new East European Jewish scholarship that emerged during his lifetime.

Shloyme-Zanvl Rapoport (1863—1920), better known by his pen name Sh. An-ski, was born in Tshashnik (now Čašniki, Belarus), not far from Vitebsk. He is remembered principally as the author of the famed mystical drama, *The Dybbuk* (which he wrote in Yiddish and Russian), and other works of Yiddish literature (see pp. 244-245). He was, however, also a founder of serious modern Yiddish folklore studies and the pioneer of ethnographic expeditions within Eastern Europe.

The Dybbuk itself was a product of his folkloristic-ethnographic expeditions to the Ukraine. He followed up with developing an academic program for the future of Yiddish ethnographic studies. A museum in his memory thrived in Vilna between the two world wars. An-ski was buried in Warsaw alongside Y. L. Peretz, one of the founders of modern Yiddish literature. The original monument, including also Jacob Dinezon (1852—1919), still stands in the old Jewish cemetery in Warsaw.



Zhitlovsky Foundation

Sh. An-ski

In Vilna

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Shmuel Niger

Shmuel Niger (1883—1955) was a son of a famous family, the Charneys, of Dukór (now in Belarus). He went on to become, arguably, the greatest Yiddish literary critic of the post World War I era, picking up the mantle of Bal-Makhshóves (see p. 246). He settled in New York around 1919. But it was during his Vilna period, in the years before the First World War, that he played a key role in founding modern Yiddish scholarship.

Working closely with Vilna publisher Boris Kletskin, Niger edited the collective academic volume that in one fell swoop established modern Yiddish philology, linguistics, literary history and bibliography as serious subjects, all of them “practiced” not only *on* Yiddish but *in* Yiddish, thereby making modern Yiddish scholarship an integral part of modern Yiddish culture. The volume was given the name accorded to a traditional Jewish record book — *pínkes* (modern Hebrew *pinkás*). Intended as an annual, only one volume appeared, in 1913, before the project was scuttled by the outbreak of the First World War. The book was published in a traditional two column folio format that is more than a little reminiscent of authoritative rabbinic books. The title was typeset in the Rashi font characteristic of rabbinic works. The cultural process underway in Vilna entailed the creation of a modern culture using a multitude of components — and symbols — of traditional Jewish religious culture.



Menke Katz Collection

Der pinkes (Vilna, 1913)

To students of Jewish political history, Ber Borokhov (1881—1917) is best known as the theoretical founder of the *Poalei Zion* (Labor Zionism) movement, which combined the ideals of socialism and Zionism, and which played a huge role in the rise and earlier years of the State of Israel. The last years of his short life (he died at the age of thirty-six) were, however, dedicated almost entirely to the founding of academic Yiddish studies, which he subsumed under the national and romantic name, *di yidishe filológye* (“Yiddish philology” meant in its wider sense of linguistics *plus* literary history *plus* folklore and so forth, and meant in a second sense, now called the “Borokhovian” sense, of having respect for and belief in the future of the culture one is studying, in distinction to “pure and abstract” science). For this bold original thinker it was absolutely no problem to be a Zionist and a staunch Yiddishist, a rare combination in those times.

Borokhov wrote two pathbreaking pieces that “sandwiched” the Vilna *Pinkes* of 1913. The volume starts with Borokhov’s *Ufgabn fun der yidisher filológye* (“The Tasks of Yiddish Philology”), a survey of the history of Yiddish language and literature, and a conceptualization of what needs to be accomplished. Citing the role of the development of folk languages to national languages among the smaller nations of Europe, and the role of national philology in the process, he proposed Yiddish philology as a self-centered universe. In other words, Yiddish as its own discipline, looked at from inside, rather than a sub-branch of some other field. Borokhov’s *yidishe filológye* was overtly linked to the cultural development of East European Jewry, and he insisted it be developed to the same high academic standards that would be required by a nation-state culture with its own universities. The inclusion of Yiddish studies in universities around the world today is a direct result of a chain of events starting with this essay.

It was Ber Borokhov who proclaimed, in a section of the essay devoted to spelling and standard language: “For the basis I take the pronunciation of the Vilna region.” And so, in one sentence, Borokhov gave Yiddish its proverbial capital and provided the language with the necessary symbolic attributes of modern languages. French had its Île-de-France, English its Oxford, and Yiddish — its Vilna. The actual process of standardization of spoken Yiddish overwhelmingly on the basis of *Litvish*, Lithuanian Yiddish, was in any case underway, with due respect, of course, for the other dialects.

The Vilna *Pinkes* of 1913 ends with Borokhov’s *Biblyoték funem yidishn filológ* (“Library of the Yiddish Philologist”), an annotated, critical bibliography of five hundred works, in an array of languages (especially Latin, German and Hebrew), which had been written *about* Yiddish in the four centuries from 1514 (date of the first entry) to 1913. Few people (including scholars and teachers) had been



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Ber Borokhov

aware of the immense interest Yiddish had attracted from *outside* its natural community of speakers. Borokhov made the point that it was time for East European Jewry to build academic institutions dedicated to its own language and culture. Many of his dreams came to reality shortly after his death.

Creation of the infrastructure for this new field of scholarship was not supported by any state (except in the USSR). It depended on remarkable individuals whose energy, dedication and success “made it all happen.” The master publisher of modern Yiddish scholarship was Boris Kletskin, a native of Haróditsh (now in Belarus), who put his considerable family wealth in the service of Yiddish culture. His belief in the role of Yiddish came from the Jewish Labor Bund, to which he remained dedicated all his life. The same Boris Kletskin who published the first-ever Yiddish academic anthology, the *Pinkes*, also published nearly all of the academic volumes to appear in Vilna in the 1920s and 1930s which catapulted the city to the status of “effective” (not just symbolic) capital of “high” Yiddish culture. His books included Reyzen’s *Leksikón* (see p. 257) and the scholarly publications of the Yivo (see below). Kletskin was also the publisher of the world’s leading Yiddish literary weekly, *Literárishe bléter*, which appeared in Warsaw in the interwar period.



Yivo

Boris Kletskin

After the end of the First World War, a number of top Yiddish scholars, all Litvaks but none from Vilna itself, moved to the city and established it as the world center of Yiddish scholarship for what is now known as the interwar period (when Vilna, called Wilno, was incorporated into the Polish Republic). What exactly drew them all to Vilna in the absence of any promise of support for their research remains to be studied. The centuries old magic of the city for traditional Jewish culture certainly had something to do with it. This was the city of the Gaon. Zelik-Hirsh Kalmanovitsh, Meyshe Kulbak, Zalmen Reyzen, Max Weinreich and numerous other Yiddish scholars, educators, writers and artists were attracted to it as if by a kind of magnetism.

Zalmen Reyzen was born in Kóydenov (now Dzierżynsk, Belarus) in 1887. He is best known for his four volume biographical and bibliographical encyclopedia of Yiddish literature (published by Boris Kletskin in Vilna, 1926-1929; see p. 257). It was a massive expansion of the one volume edition he had published back in 1914, and epitomized the synergistic interaction between Yiddish scholarship and living Yiddish culture.



Leybe Reyzen (London)

Zalmen Reyzen

Reyzen's accomplishments in Yiddish scholarship were vast. His pioneering grammar of 1920 succeeded in establishing the modern Yiddish spelling perfected by Borokhov (with some modification) as the everyday norm for the new Yiddish school systems. In 1923 he published an anthology of eighteenth and nineteenth century Yiddish literature. His many papers in Yiddish linguistics, stylistics and literary history have remained a must for serious Yiddish scholars. On top of his constant work on his literary encyclopedias and his own scholarly output, he edited a major Vilna Yiddish daily, the *Vilner tog* ("Vilna Day"). Looking at his life's work nowadays, students often ask "How did he manage to do all that?"

Reyzen was arrested by the Soviets soon after they occupied Vilna in September 1939, and taken to prisons further east and executed. The date of his death remains unknown.

The prime mover and preeminent scholar of the Vilna school was Max Weinreich. A native of Goldingen, Courland (now Kuldīga, Latvia), he was born into a Germanized Jewish family in 1894 and became attracted to the Bund and its ideals in his youth. He started performing "miracles in Yiddish" in his teens (including a partial translation of Homer's *Iliad* into sophisticated Yiddish hexameter). He completed his doctorate on the history of Yiddish studies in 1923 at Marburg University in Germany, thereby becoming the first "modern Yiddishist with a doctorate in the field." After settling in Vilna he also became a central personality in its higher educational institutions in Yiddish, especially the Yiddish Teachers' Seminary.

In 1925 (the same year that the Hebrew University was founded in Jerusalem), Yiddish scholars in Europe felt the time was ripe for a realization of Borokhov's stated goal of setting up a Yiddish academy for the first time in history. A group of Yiddish scholars in Berlin (where the major personality was then Nokhem Shtif, who later migrated to the Soviet Union) and from among the Vilna group began holding meetings and consultations. Two well known publications resulted. They are the *Forbaratung vegn dem vísnschaftlekhn institút* ("Preliminary Consultation about the Academic Institute", Berlin 1925) and *Di organizátsye fun der yídisher vísnschaft* ("The Organization of the Science of Yiddish", Vilna 1925), the most famous part of which is Weinreich's memorandum called, quite simply, *Vilner tézisz* ("Vilna Theses").



Yivo

Max Weinreich



Berlin proposals for a Yiddish
academic institute and . . .



the proposals in Vilna

Menke Katz Collection

It wasn't long before the question arose of where the new institute should be based: Berlin or Vilna?

The issue was solved by “facts on the ground.” Max Weinreich called the planned institute “Yivo,” an acronym for the *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher institut* (“Yiddish Scientific Institute”), and went ahead and set it up in his apartment on the top floor of Pohulanka Street 14, Wilno (now Basanavičiaus 16, Vilnius). The Yivo moved to its own premises down the street, and some few years later to a large purpose-built structure with state of the art facilities on Vivulski Street (then Wiwulskiego, now Vivulskio). The address “Vivulski 18” became an international symbol of the rise of Yiddish. This stateless language now had its own prestigious academy!

To understand how important it was for the Yiddish language, not widely regarded then as a worthy object of serious study, to have acquired such “trappings of modern languagehood,” one might best quote the words of a skeptical visitor. The British Jewish scholar Israel Cohen (1879—1961), a native of Manchester, was much more interested in Hebrew and Israel than in Yiddish. But he had this to say in his book of memoirs of prewar travels in Eastern Europe:



Bluma Katz (Svintoyang/Sventionys)

“The people for scholarship?” The October
26th 1929 celebration on Yivulki Street (now
Yivulskiot), as the cornerstone is laid for Yivo’s
new building at no. 45

“Not until I visited its commodious premises, in a building far removed from the Ghetto [outsider’s term for the Jewish Quarter — DK], did I realize the scope and systematic character of its labors, for its purpose was to collect and classify all sorts of publications [...] that have appeared in Yiddish and to promote research [...] under four principal divisions: history, sociology, philology and pedagogics; and, culture, the last comprising several subdivisions, such as art, drama, music, and folklore. The Institute filed newspapers from all over the world and kept a card index of all their important contents, especially signed articles. It had a most interesting collection of portraits of Yiddish and Hebrew actors, and of playbills and dramatic notices, and likewise a veritable treasury of Jewish music. [...] For the benefit of the outside reader there was a large lending library, and in the research room I saw serious students exploring the different fields of Yiddish lore. The Institute was growing so fast [...] that it was found necessary to construct a special home to accommodate it.

“The director insisted on my accompanying him to the new building, an imposing structure of three stories, situated in a fine part of the city. It has extensive cellerage for archives and old newspapers, with up to date mechanical contrivances for protection against fire and water. [...] I could not help marveling that in this city, where poverty was more rampant than in any other part of Poland, so much money should be spent on purely scientific research on the products of a language born of the travails of exile.”

(Israel Cohen, *Travels in Jewry*, New York 1953, pp. 146-147)

Students rapidly came on board, from Vilna and further afield. Weinreich succeeded in constructing a program of research, teaching and publishing that brought the *Yivo* wide academic recognition in a short period of time. The academic anthologies of scholarly studies in Yiddish, nearly all published by Boris Kletskin, were impressive in their quality, quantity and sophistication of production. The most elaborate series was called *Filológishe shriftn* (“Philological Writings”). The first volume, comprising forty-one studies over some 450 folio columns, appeared when the *Yivo* was only one year old, in 1926.

Weinreich’s own scholarly creativity was prolific and brilliant. His interwar Vilna-era works in literary history, philology, linguistics, and other disciplines continue to be studied by advanced Yiddish students around the world. His output only increased after he lost an eye during a “small” anti-Semitic



The Yivo building at Vivalski 18

outburst by a group of hooligans. He spent a year at Yale University in the mid 1930s and became interested in Freudian psychology. This “side interest” resulted in a large volume in Yiddish on youth psychology in 1935; one of his last Vilna era works before the war was a translation of Freud’s *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* into Yiddish.

Tsemakh Shabad (1864—1935) was a Vilna man through and through. He completed his medical studies in Moscow in 1889 and returned home to set up his practice in 1894. He quickly became a legend for Jews and non-Jews alike, as a great doctor, and also, a great human being who would travel around the villages treating poor children, of all backgrounds and religions, for free. The words “Dr. Shabad is on his way” brought tears of relief, in an array of local languages, to poor people who could not otherwise dream of advanced medical treatment. He also contributed much to medical and health journals.



Vilnius Yiddish Institute

Dr. Tsemakh Shabad

Dr. Shabad became an adherent of the new secular Yiddish culture movement and a leader of Vilna Jewry. He was the community’s chairman during the First World War, and served on the city council later on. His contributions to Yiddish culture include pivotal work in setting up the infrastructure of the new Yiddish school system. He edited and published a number of Yiddish serials, including the *Vilner zámlikher* (“Vilna Anthologies”, 1916–1918) which served as an impetus to the new school system.

Shabad’s link to Yiddish research and higher education was a natural development from these interests. It came to fruition through his close friendship with Max Weinreich who became his son-in-law. Regina Shabad-Weinreich was a beloved figure in her own right in the growth of Yiddish culture in Vilna, a sort of first lady of the new cultural elite. And, it was an open secret in Vilna that it was Shabad who financially enabled Weinreich to set up the Yivo in 1925. And the rest, as they say, is history. . .



Menke Katz Collection

First of the Yivo’s academic anthologies in Yiddish (1926)



Shalom Luria (Haifa University)

Zelik-Hirsh Kalmanovitsh

Zelik-Hirsh Kalmanovitsh (1885—1944) was, like Max Weinreich, a native of Goldingen. He studied Semitic philology in Königsberg and did his doctorate in St. Petersburg. He is the author of a Yiddish grammar and numerous studies in Yiddish stylistics, dialectology, cultural history and literature. He also became a master translator who rendered a large number of great works into the best literary Yiddish.

Kalmanovitsh helped build modern Yiddish scholarship in all four (!) of the countries where most of the Litvaks found themselves after the establishment of the post World War I order (see p. 319). In the 1920s, he trained Yiddish teachers in Minsk (in the Belorussian Republic of the Soviet Union); edited a newspaper in Riga (Latvia); taught and edited in Kovna (Kaunas) and Ponevezh (Panevėžys) in the Lithuanian Republic. In the late 1920s he settled in Vilna (Wilno, Poland), and became a leading figure in the Yivo, and editor of its monthly academic periodical, the *Yivo bleter*.

After the Nazis invaded, Kalmanovitsh was incarcerated in the Vilna Ghetto, where he became the chief proponent of “spiritual resistance,” the idea that Jews must even in the worst conditions continue to study, teach and preserve their culture, rather than take to armed revolt and risk even more total devastation. His remarkable ghetto diary, written in Hebrew, appeared in English translation in 1953. The original was later published with an extensive introduction by his son, Dr. Shalom Luria, one of the leading Yiddish literary scholars in Israel today. Zelik Kalmanovitsh’s remarkable role in the Vilna Ghetto was recently re-examined in Rachel Kostanian-Danzig’s *Spiritual Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto* (Vilnius 2002).

Kalmanovitsh was deported from the Vilna Ghetto to a concentration camp in Estonia, where he perished in the winter of 1944.

In the Soviet Union. . .

For some years, especially the time from the mid twenties to the early-mid thirties, Yiddish scholarship was developed in the Soviet Union, in government supported institutes in Kiev, Kharkov, Moscow, and most productively, Minsk. For a brief period there were gentlemanly relationships between the great center in Vilna and the institute in Minsk, where the first collective volume of scholarly papers, *Tsaytshrift*, appeared in 1926 (the same year in which Yivo produced volume one of *Filológishe shriftn*). It even included a contribution by Max Weinreich, sent from Vilna. It seemed for a brief period that Lithuanian Jewish scholars on both sides of the new (and tense) border between northeastern Poland and the Belorussian Soviet Republic were together building the new science of Yiddish.



Menke Katz Collection

First volume of the
Minsk *Tsaytshrift*

The most ambitious project on the Soviet side of the border was the Minsk initiative to produce a dialectological atlas of Yiddish. It was the brainchild of a fine Soviet Yiddish linguist, Mordkhe Veynger (1890—1929), who published an important survey, *Yidishe dyalektolôgye* (“Yiddish Dialectology”) in 1929. He was chairman of the language commission of the Yiddish section of the Belorussian Academy of Sciences, and a lecturer at the Belorussian State University. He was also involved in the codification of Soviet Yiddish spelling (which did away with the historic spelling of words of Semitic origin, which were respelled according to the phonetic system used for the non-Semitic elements in the language).

The Soviet Yiddish language atlas suffered from a number of serious methodological deficiencies. It relied primarily on the “postcard method” rather than *in-situ* fieldwork (when East European Jewry was still there!) and it was (not by choice) limited to the then borders of the Soviet Union, leaving out much of the heartland of Yiddish. Still, it was a major accomplishment and provides invaluable data today.

Veynger never lived to see his atlas. He apparently committed suicide in February 1929. To this day there are two theories about his death: that it was over a failed love affair or that it was staged by “elements” opposed to such “nationalist projects” as his (though years before the actual Minsk purges began). The work was brought to publication in large atlas format, in 1931, by Veynger’s pupil Leyzer Vilenkin. For decades, the Veynger-Vilenkin atlas was used by Yiddish linguists around the world, most of whom believed Vilenkin to have fallen victim to the Soviet purges or the Holocaust; he had disappeared without a trace. It was a sensation when he turned up alive and well in Tel Aviv in 1971 among a group of new immigrants from the Soviet Union.

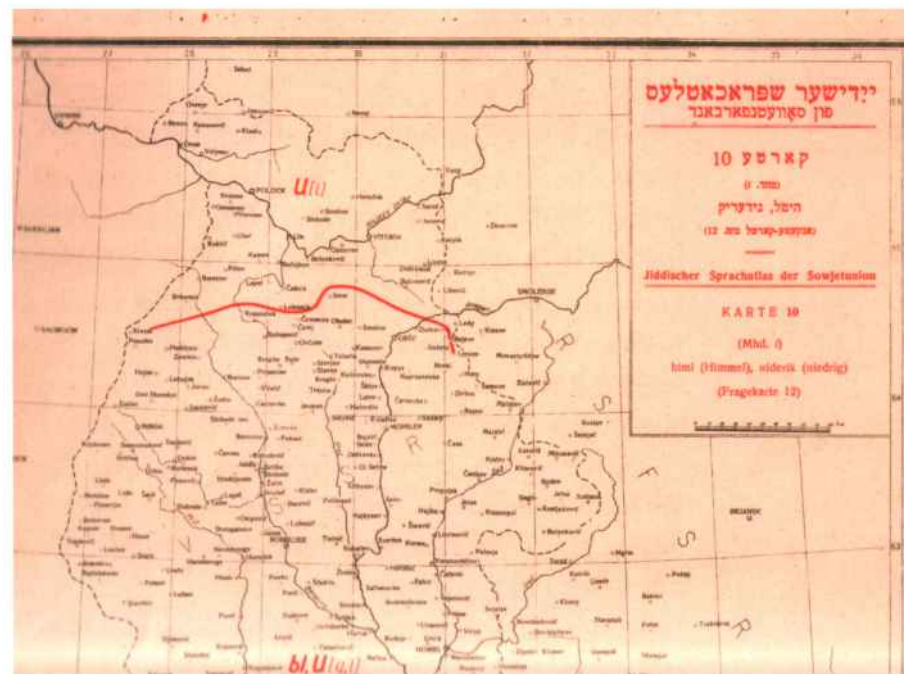


Zhinkovsky Foundation

Mordkhe Veynger

Soviet Yiddish scholarship declined rapidly in the early 1930s. Under pressure from the party and its “organs” it had deteriorated to the point of forcibly slanting virtually all academic questions toward supposedly “Marxist” solutions and hurling polemic epithets (such as “bourgeois fascized Yiddishism”) at the Vilna colleagues across the border.

Soviet Yiddish scholarship was shut down by the government through the 1930s, and most of its survivors arrested and executed as part of Stalin’s purges.



Detail of a map from the Soviet Yiddish language atlas (Minsk 1931)

Menke Katz Collection

In independent Lithuania. . .

In the interwar Lithuanian Republic (1918—1940), Jews enjoyed full cultural freedom. Schools of a variety of Jewish persuasions were supported by the government (despite various setbacks), more than in any of the other non-Soviet countries in the region. Nevertheless, Kovna (Kaunas), the interwar republic's capital, did not become an important center of organized modern Jewish scholarship though it had a vibrant Jewish press, and the traditional Lithuanian yeshivas continued to thrive, as did individual scholars.

There are several hypotheses that might be put forward to explain why the interwar Republic of Lithuania was of all places the least productive in modern Yiddish scholarship during the period of its greatest blossoming in nearby states (in the hands of Litvaks). First, the Zionist-Hebraist tradition was much stronger than the diaspora autonomist, Yiddishist tradition in the republic, and, by the very nature of that ideology, it sent many of its leading young talents to Palestine. In the Vilna region, by contrast, there was easy and constant contact with the great centers of Yiddish culture in Poland, especially Warsaw. Second, bearing in mind that none of the great builders of Yiddish scholarship in Vilna were natives of the city but had migrated there after the end of the First World War, it is important to try to understand their choice. Vilna had a magic attraction for young scholars and writers that Kovna just did not. The romantic status of the Jerusalem of Lithuania and its compact Jewish civilization, what with some sixty to seventy thousand mostly unassimilated Yiddish speaking Jewish residents, are sometimes mentioned in this connection. There may be another, more practical factor. None of the Yiddish scholars who settled in Vilna grew up on Lithuanian speaking territory. They either already knew Polish (the official and majority language in the Vilna region during that period), or could learn it quickly being speakers of Russian, Belarusian and other Slavic languages and dialects. The largely unrelated Lithuanian language of the new Kaunas based Lithuanian republic, which for them would have been exotic, may well have scared them off. These were people

who wanted to “hit the ground running” and become immersed in building the institutions of modern Yiddish scholarship.

Be that as it may, there were to be sure individual Yiddish scholars in independent Lithuania, all native speakers of Lithuanian. The most famous was Yucll Mark (1897—1975), a native of Palónge (Palanga, on Lithuania’s Baltic coast) who founded a number of Yiddish schools, elementary and secondary, in Lithuania (and some in neighboring Latvia). Most famously, he built the Yiddish *gimnázye* in Vilkomír (Ukmergė, Lithuania) into an internationally acclaimed institution. During all those years of intensive institution building, he was also taking notes on the many subdialects within Lithuanian Yiddish and becoming a master dialectologist and philologist. He contributed to academic journals in Vilna, Warsaw and beyond.

In the late 1930s, Mark moved to New York, and became a leader of the largest Yiddish school system there. In 1951 he published his masterly *Undzer lítvisher yidish* (“Our Lithuanian Yiddish”) in a commemorative book on Lithuanian Jewry. It was in the early 1950s that he began to work tirelessly on his dream of a massive, new, unabridged, multivolume Yiddish dictionary. He was the initiator, editor and chief compiler of the project, called *Groyser verterbukh fun der yidisher shprakh* or *Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*. In his later years he resettled in Jerusalem to devote himself entirely to the project. At the time of his death in 1975, three massive volumes had been published (in 1961, 1966 and 1971), and another, that he left ready for the press, appeared in 1980. The project continued for some years under the leadership of Professor Wolf Moskovich of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and other Yiddish scholars.

During his years in Vilkomir in the 1920s, Mark succeeded in inspiring to Yiddish philology a young teacher of the Lithuanian language in the *gimnazye* where they both worked. His name was Chatzkel Lemchen, who hailed from Popilán (Papilė) and Zháger (Žagarė) in northern Lithuania. The young Lemchen — known as Chackelis Lemchenas in Lithuanian — had become something of a sensation at Kaunas University when the great scholar of the Lithuanian language, Jonas Jablonskis (1861—1930), announced to a packed lecture hall that only the Jewish student Lemchenas had “placed all



Yucll Mark

the accents correctly.” When the Vilkomir Jewish secondary school — Yudd Mark’s *gimnazye* --- was in some trouble for its less than excellent standards in Lithuanian language, Mark persuaded the young Lemchen to come and join the faculty. His first task was to intensively train all the pupils to pass their Lithuanian examinations that term. And they did.

Lemchen made the study of the linguistic contacts between Yiddish and Lithuanian into one of his life’s projects. He survived the Kovna Ghetto and Dachau and after the war became a leading philologist in Lithuania, best known for his Lithuanian-Russian and Russian-Lithuanian dictionaries. Through a massive effort he managed to get his book on the Lithuanian influence

on Lithuanian Yiddish published in 1970, not a mean accomplishment in Soviet times. In the early 1990s, Lemchen, approaching his ninetieth birthday, prepared a new and expanded version of his study in Yiddish. It appeared as the lead work in *Oxford Yiddish III* (1995). Throughout the decade, and up to his death at the end of 2001, at the age of ninety-seven, Lemchen, at his modest home in the quiet Žvėrynas section of Vilnius, remained a symbol of the survival of Lithuanian Yiddish scholarship into the new century. Scholars from far and wide came to sit down and talk over this or that detail of Yiddish philology.

CH. LEMCHENAS

LIETUVIŲ KALBOS JTAKA
LIETUVOS ŽYDIŲ TARNIEI
LIETUVIŠKIJU SKOUNEM

YIDDISKES SONTES



Menke Katz Collection

Lemchen’s 1970 book on
Lithuanian Yiddish, thought to be
the only linguistic book on
Yiddish in the Lithuanian language

Chatzkel Lemchen in his
Vilnius study (1992)



Paulius Uftekis (Vilnius)

In the United States

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For all its strength in numbers and increasing wealth, and the luxury of living in a tolerant and free country (and in part because of the assimilation thereby accelerated), the American Jewish community was not, by and large, interested in Yiddish and East European Jewish culture. The traditionally orthodox continued to speak the language, and from the 1960s onward, small groups of secular university students have been attracted to Yiddish. In recent decades, there has been a marked development of university programs in Yiddish studies, ranging from popular elementary courses in the language to professorships at a number of leading institutions, including Columbia, Harvard and the state universities of Indiana (at Bloomington), Ohio (at Columbus), and California (at Los Angeles). The major resource center internationally continues to be the Vilna-founded Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York. It was the escape from Europe of its founder, Max Weinreich, that led to the rise of the field in America.

When war broke out on 1 September 1939, Max Weinreich and his elder son Uriel were in Copenhagen, en route to the International Congress of Linguists in Brussels. Weinreich never returned to Vilna. He and Uriel were reunited with Regina and their younger son Gabriel (Gabi) in New York in 1940. Max Weinreich immediately set about building the American section of the Yivo into its international headquarters. After the Holocaust, in the late 1940s, many of the Yivo treasures the Nazis had pilfered (for their museum of an "extinct race"), were returned to Yivo, thanks to the intervention of the American secretary of state. The story is told in Lucy Dawidowicz's *From that Time and Place* (1989), which also tells of her year in Vilna (1938-1939) as a student of the Yivo just before the outbreak of war.

Other treasures from the Yivo and other collections, it turns out, left behind in Vilnius, were rescued from being recycled to Soviet paper mills by the bravery of the Lithuanian scholar Dr. Antanas Ulpis, director of the Lithuanian National Book Chamber.

In the United States the Yivo was eventually renamed the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, and Weinreich remained at its helm until his death in 1969. His four-volume masterpiece, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh* (“History of the Yiddish Language”) appeared posthumously in New York in 1973. A partial English translation was published in 1980, and Yivo, in partnership with Yale University Press, brought out the entire work in English in 2008.

Max Weinreich’s younger son is Professor Gabriel Weinreich of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, an acclaimed specialist on the physics of musical instruments. He is known in the world of Yiddish for his lectures on “Growing up Yiddish in Vilna.”

Intellectually, Yiddish studies at American universities can be traced largely to Max Weinreich’s elder son, Uriel. Born in Vilna in 1926, he was to become, in America, a world class master in general linguistics. His *Languages in Contact* (New York 1953) remains a classic. Uriel Weinreich was appointed professor of Yiddish at Columbia University in New York and published several dozen seminal papers in Yiddish linguistics which established the intellectual foundation, in English, for the field of Yiddish scholarship to grow in the west.

The younger Weinreich also established the basis for inclusion of Yiddish language studies in North American universities (and eventually worldwide). His *College Yiddish*, which first appeared in 1949, and has remained in print ever since, enabled the introduction of Yiddish language courses in American universities (something that had previously been more or less unthinkable, given the many prejudices against Yiddish in the American Jewish establishment). It took several decades (!) for the book to become widely used on American college campuses.

In 1954, he launched the *Field of Yiddish* series of occasional volumes containing works of scholars on various issues of Yiddish studies (covering linguistics, literature, folklore, bibliography and more). And during his last years — he died of cancer at the age of forty in 1967 — he completed his *English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary* which appeared posthumously in 1968, copublished by Yivo. It has been a standard Yiddish dictionary for university students of Yiddish ever since.

His most far-reaching project was a new *Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry*, covering all of the historic territory of Yiddish in Europe (see map on p. 49). An American born scholar, Jean Jofen, had demonstrated in her 1953 doctoral thesis that it was possible to create Yiddish linguistic atlases even after the Holocaust. The author of the present volume is at work on an in-situ project limited to the territory



Yivo

Max Weinreich in
America



Yivo

Uriel Weinreich

of the Lithuanian Yiddish dialects (<http://www.dovidkatz.net/WebAtlas/AtlasSamples.htm>).

Uriel Weinreich divided the target territory into a grid and sought out informants in America and Israel who hailed from each part of that grid. Over six hundred extensive interviews yielded a mass of information, much of it in response to his detailed questionnaire, itself an intricate work. Three volumes of the atlas have appeared (1992, 1995, 2000) and more are in progress. After his death, the project was directed by his pupil Marvin I. Herzog. It is now being led in Germany by Ulrike Kiefer, Robert Neumann and other scholars, and is being made available online (<http://www.eydes.de/>).

In recent years, the Yivo has undergone significant growth and development, and it remains the world's central resource center for scholars of Yiddish and East European Jewish culture. In 2008, it published the extensive two-volume *Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, edited by Gershon David Hundert. In the 1990s, it launched a renewed *Yivo bléter* series edited by Professor David E. Fishman of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. At present, three impressive volumes have appeared. The editor is an American Yiddish scholar, Professor David E. Fishman of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

In addition to institutions dedicated to Yiddish and East European Jewish studies, there are a number of individual Litvaks who continue to contribute prolifically. One of the best known is Benjamin Hrushovski, who was born in Vilna in 1928, and lived in Israel many years before taking up his professorship at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Despite the typically Israeli name change to

Harshav he continues to be known by many as "Hrushovski." His father was one of the teachers brought from Ukraine by Sofia Gurevitch to teach in her Vilna secondary school (see p. 278) and his mother, lovingly known by her pupils as *Di léerke Freydke's*, was one of the best known teachers in Yiddish Vilna.

He is a top scholar of both Yiddish and Hebrew literature (quite uniquely in modern times), in addition to writing poetry in both languages (even more unique). He and his wife Barbara are considered the finest translators of Yiddish verse into English. They are best known for their anthology, *American Yiddish Poetry* (Berkeley 1986). They produced a massive edition of Herman Kruk's Vilna Ghetto diary (*The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania*, 2002).



A 1990s volume of the renewed *Yivo bléter* in New York



Benjamin Hrushovski (Harshav)

Chapter 12

Times of Revolution

While a majority of Ukrainian Jewry and quite a number of Polish Jews came under the rule of the expanded Russian Empire after the three partitions of Poland (1772, 1793 and 1795), virtually all Lithuanian Jews — the Litvaks — became part of Catherine the Great’s expanding Russian Empire. The glory of Gedymin’s and Witold’s multiculturalist tolerance, of the autonomous Jewish Council of Lithuania and of the apex of the epoch — the Gaon of Vilna and his heavenly scholarly court — all had to adapt rapidly to the new czarist regime which could think about such things only in terms of “the Jewish problem.” The new regime hastened to impose a series of discriminatory, debilitating and humiliating laws. At the same time, the Russian period was one of steady population growth and of enormous cultural and literary creativity in the face of adversity.

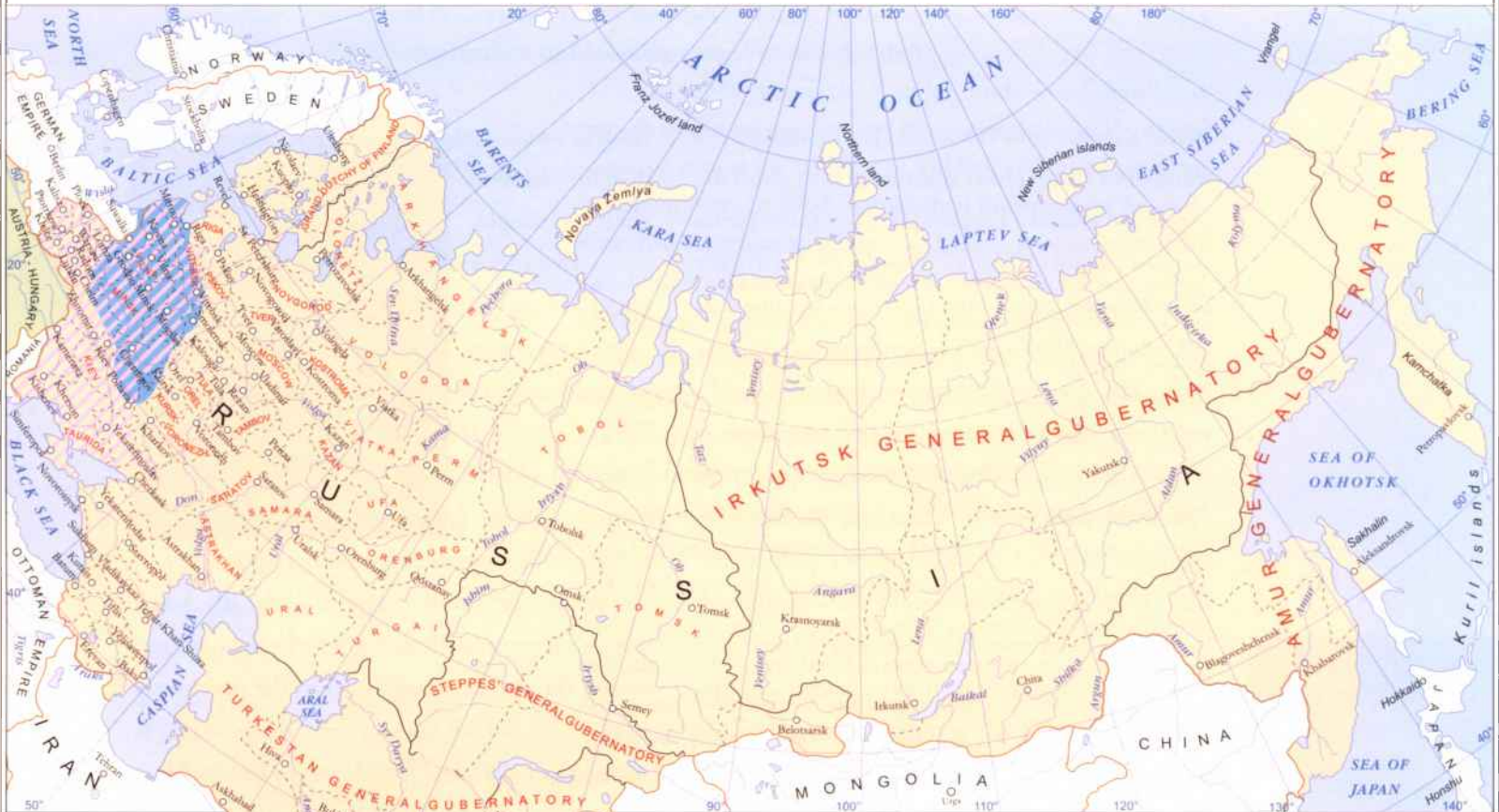
The legal history of the edicts, their occasional reversals, and the ups and downs of official and daily life are well documented in many histories of the Jews in the Russian Empire. Each event is usually associated with the reigning czar, on whose watch it was enacted. While each episode

is very complex, the crux of the new *gzéyre* (Yiddish for “harsh decree”) was in each case all too stark and simple.



In a series of edicts during Catherine the Great’s reign (1762—1796), the Pale of Settlement was created. On the one hand, the Pale affirmed the right of the Jews to remain resident in the areas where they had been living for generations and which had now come into the Russian Empire. In a few cases, czarist policies even permitted settlement in certain other areas (for example the uninhabited steppes of the Black Sea shores). In general, however, it forbade migration within the Russian Empire from the previously settled area, which became, in a series of edicts starting in 1791, the “Jewish part of Russia.” It is however important, from the viewpoint of cultural history, to note that the traditional Jewish name for the Pale is *tkhum-hamóyshev*, which is neutral, or even warm, in its nuancing. Telling people they must live where they have always lived, while far from a twenty-first century conceptualization of human rights, was not all that bad compared to a second piece of “Jewish

The Pale of Settlement within Russia in the 19th Century Lithuanian Jewry within the Pale

Scale 1:35,000,000



Bilingual Russian and Yiddish advertisement for novel contraptions for the home, from the high Pale of Settlement era

-  Pale of Settlement area
-  Lithuanian Jewry within the Pale
- KAZAN** Gubernias (Russian Empire Provinces)

© Dovid Katz 2004
Cartography by Gicadre Beconyte



Аппаратъ для выду-
шья бутылочъ.
פּאַראַט דאַר אַר
אַר



Дאַ рашлѣнѣ пѣнѣ и вѣнѣ.
דאַ рашлѣнѣ פֿען
ווי



Филътра для очи-
щѣнѣ водѣ.
дѣ (филъ) ачѣрѣ
дѣрѣнѣ



Помпѣ для поливѣя садѣвъ.
פּומפֿע דאַר פּו-
לירѣ



Помпѣ для
вѣрѣнѣ.
פּומפֿע דאַר
вѣрѣнѣ



Лѣдникъ для охладѣнѣя
пѣнѣ, и сѣбѣя прѣд-
дѣрѣнѣ и сѣбѣя прѣд-
дѣрѣнѣ

legislation” in Catherine’s years. That was the decree of 1794 subjecting subjects of the Jewish faith to *double* taxation. It is hard to imagine a more ignominious and personally damaging form of suddenly diminished citizenship.

The brief reign of Paul I (1796—1801), though not a happy one in Russian history (ending as it did in his assassination), is usually thought of as a respite for the Jews of the Pale. He permitted Jewish settlement in Courland, and granted the Jews there both citizenship and municipal rights. He made it more difficult for blood libels to be inflicted, and resisted the anti-Jewish recommendations of the Jew-baiting Senator Derzhavin.

The respite, as it were, continued during most of the reign of Alexander I (1801—1825), an admirer of Rousseau. An order of 1802 led to the enactment of 1804, which permitted Jews to buy and rent land and to enter all educational institutions from elementary school through to university. He even permitted business trips outside the Pale (as long as Jews wore “German clothing,” the same modern attire popular among Maskilim). The “double edged sword” effect cannot be neglected here. Nor can the convergence of these benevolent czarist gifts with maskilic preference. Many in the czar’s court aimed at assimilating the Jews. The notion of a Jew attending secular and overwhelmingly Christian educational institutions instead of the traditional Jewish schools was not a privilege but a catastrophe for the average traditionally religious Jewish family. For the Maskilim it was, by contrast, a privi-

lege to be fought for. This “czarist-maskilic pact,” as we have seen, was an explicit one. Alexander I is known for his comment: “If as a result of my efforts to improve their condition, I were to succeed in producing a single Mendelssohn from among all Russian Jews, I would feel very much rewarded.” The reference is of course to Moses Mendelssohn, founder and leader of the German-Jewish Enlightenment movement (see p. 203).

Nevertheless, he goes down as a benevolent monarch, not least because of the repeal of double taxation (1817) and his donation of three thousand rubles toward the construction of the Jewish Hospital in Vilna, and further contributions toward its maintenance. In 1818, he arranged for Jewish representatives to reside at St. Petersburg to be on hand to participate in discussions on Jewish affairs. The deputies elected at Vilna were all Litvaks: Zundl Sonenberg of Grodna; Beynush Baratz of Vitebsk; Mikhl Eisenshtat of Mohilev. There was, however, a sour note. To cover the expenses of the representatives, sacred ornaments from the attire worn on the Day of Atonement were appropriated.

At the end, however, even this “libertarian” made an about-face, and his last few years were marked by repressive measures, including a ban on permanent settlement in Russia (1824). Most harmful of all was the edict of 1825 legislating the expulsion of Jews who lived in the countryside and in the hamlets (*yishúvim*) to the cities and mostly to the townlets (*shtétlakh*, or shtetls, as per current English usage). It was one of a series of nineteenth century edicts (sometimes

enforced, sometimes ignored) forcing Jews out of rural habitats into the towns. Given the long Jewish history of expulsions, this was a particularly painful blow. Double taxation was “replaced” by “special Jewish taxes.”

Various laws had been passed over the years against the traditional Jewish vocation of running inns and pubs and distilling alcohol, and against the traditional Jewish role of serving as leaseholder of the lord, the so-called Jewish middleman between the lords and the peasantry.

Matters worsened during the infamous thirty-year reign of Nicholas I (1825 to 1855). His oppressive rule was disastrous for the vast majority of residents of Russia. For the Jews special tortures were in store among the six hundred or so “Jewish laws” passed during his rule. There was a conscious campaign to “diminish” the number of Jews, mostly by encouraging baptism. Baptized Jews, for example, were exempt not only from double taxation, but from all taxation for three years. In 1827, the Jewish exemption from military service (for payment of a special tax) was repealed with a vengeance. Jewish boys as young as twelve were taken for twenty-five years of service, and the proportion of the population so taken was far greater than that in force for Christians. The obligation to make up numbers fell on the organized Jewish communities of each locale, and the result was the rise of the hated *khaper* (literally “catcher”) who would in effect kidnap children to provide the quota. These unfortunate children, many of whom died of abuse and starvation, became known as *kantonistsn* (“cantonists”), a

word derived from the cantonments which were supposed to be barracks for the children of soldiers (and ended up being used for child-soldiers themselves). Moreover, in 1844, the legal status of the organized Jewish community or *kohol* (*kahal*) was abolished.

It is interesting that Nicholas’s education chiefs found it necessary to meddle intimately in Jewish education. Various of the Maskilim had “explained” to their government contacts that reform of the traditional Jewish education would produce just the kind of Jew the Russian regime wanted. In the time of Nicholas I, the regime employed a modern rabbi from Germany to “put things in order.” He was Max Lilienthal (1815—1882), who had moved to Riga to teach in a Germanized Jewish school there.

Lilienthal struck up a friendship with the czarist Minister for Education, S. S. Uvarov (1786—1855). Uvarov invited his pal to advise on the creation of a network of government organized Jewish schools in the Pale of Settlement (to be maintained by special new taxes on the Jewish population).

One of the curious results of Lilienthal’s activities in Lithuania was the attainment of a sort of formal peace between the leaders of the erstwhile bitter enemy camps within Lithuanian Jewry: Misnagdim and Hasidim. When Uvarov and Lilienthal had set up their educational committee, the traditionalists joined forces rapidly. The head of the Valozhin yeshiva, the leading Misnagdic academy in the Vilna region, Itsel (son of Chaim) Valozhiner, symbolic heir to the Gaon’s

Lithuanian Jewry Within East European Jewry after the 1815 Congress of Vienna

Scale 1: 13,200,000



legacy, got together with the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem-Mendel Schneerson, to head to St. Petersburg together to confront Lilienthal with one voice, to proclaim a united front in demanding that the Jews be able to run their own schools according to their own traditions and laws. That was in May 1843.

Lilienthal's Waterloo came in — Vilna. At first he convinced the community to support his new reformed rabbinical college where Talmudic studies would be minimized or phased out altogether, and Russian and other secular subjects phased in. The Russian authorities and Lilienthal, working together, tried to soften the impact (detractors would say: “cover their tracks” or “disguise their true purpose”) by attempting to attract top Talmudic scholars whose names and reputations would give the Jewish population confidence in the Jewish studies component of the enterprise. The most famous story, which has come down in various versions, has been mentioned above (p. 157): the attempts to coerce Yisroel Salanter, the founder of the Muser movement, who then lived in Vilna and ran a yeshiva, into teaching at the new school. The end result was that both Salanter and Lilienthal left, Salanter because he would not teach there, and Lilienthal, because he came to see that the “primitive Jews of the Pale” has been correct in suspecting the czarist government and Uvarov of aspiring to mass baptism. In 1844, Lilienthal “left town before sundown,” and, after a rabbinical stint in New York eventually settled in Cincinnati where he was to help build Reform Judaism in America.

Alexander the Second's reign (1855—1881) was moderate by comparison, and marked by an atmosphere of increased tolerance. He repealed the worst of the cantonist system of child-soldiers, and even Jewish communities outside the Pale enjoyed relative peace during his reign. Many more Jewish students were allowed into the schools and universities after the liberal reforms of 1861. The number of Jewish university students grew from the single digits in the 1840s to approximately 1,700 in the 1880s. That is a very low proportion of the close to five million Jewish residents of European Russia, but a very high number compared to the erstwhile near-zero.

But concentrated and sometimes ancient anti-Jewish feelings were stirred in the aftermath of Alexander II's assassination in 1881, and the age of pogroms was unleashed. Nearly all took place in the Ukraine, and none in Lithuania, a point which Litvaks even today point to in support of the notion that interfaith relations were consistently better in Lithuania (up to the Holocaust, that is). There were individual crimes (usually arson), but local authorities and community leaders alike worked to bring offenders to justice, and clamped down to forestall disorders.

The violence of the pogroms and the number of victims seem insignificant by the following century's standards of carnage, but at the time, the specter of mobs running loose, killing, maiming, looting, raping and destroying property, sometimes with the tolerance (or connivance) of local police, sent alarm bells ringing throughout the Jewish communities of Russia. Among the

results were the onset of mass migration to the west; the bolstering of the new Zionist movement; and, among the vast numbers for whom “where you live is home” — the rise of the Jewish labor movement.

In many ways, the Jewish labor movement was one of the unilinear outgrowths of the Haskalah. By then, a few generations of Maskilim had produced people who were rather less fearful of ignoring Jewish religious traditions, and whose entire personal belief systems had been to some degree westernized. It had also produced many who were actual soul-mates, not just on cordial terms, with Gentile neighbors. This became possible because of the secularization movement that heavily impacted Russian and western society in ways partially parallel to the effects of the Haskalah among Jews. The feeling of an intrinsic necessity for separateness was melting away among certain groups and individuals, as their own and their erstwhile “enemy” religious symbols were losing potency. At the same time, it must be remembered that the vast majority of the Jewish population remained traditional Ashkenazim who followed the ancient heritage. Many individuals and families were exemplars of an infinite number of varieties of synthesis between the “vertical” and “horizontal” options.

The atmosphere worsened with the accession of Alexander III, who ruled from 1881 to 1894. The pogroms of 1881 were blamed on the victims (“only in Russia,” said a Yiddish saying of the day), and resulted in the “May Laws” is-

sued on May 3rd 1882. These edicts forbade Jews to settle outside cities and townships; halted (“temporarily”) purchase of property and mortgages in the name of Jews; halted (again “temporarily”) the leasing by Jews of real estate outside cities and townships; forbade Jewish commerce on Sundays and Christian holidays.

This czar was guided by the procurator of the Holy Synod, Pobiedonostev, who summed up the aims of the policy in his infamous remark that a third of the Jews would be forced to emigrate, a third would be baptized and a third brought to starvation. There were acts of violence, expulsions of Jews from Russia proper to the Pale, laws against the use of Yiddish and Hebrew in business documents, and much more. Emigration continued apace.

The general situation in czarist Russia had been unstable from at least the middle of the nineteenth century. The intelligentsia wanted a more liberal, less autocratic society. The peasants living in communes wanted to own land, and the overexploited burgeoning working class created by the Industrial Revolution wanted better conditions. From the 1860s onward, radical intellectuals were inspiring peasants and workers to revolt. After the failure of various legal methods, some groups turned to terror. The most spectacular instance was the assassination of the czar in 1881. Many revolutionary groups were founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Some Jews, especially those from maskilic families, from Russified backgrounds and from settlements outside the Pale began to join forces with Russian revolutionaries in the hope of bringing about a new liberal society and overthrowing the hated, autocratic czarist regime. Jews were to be found in virtually every one of the revolutionary movements, and it wasn't long before the unique East European version of the Haskalah — worldly outlook and genres synthesized with Jewish languages and cultural content — had evolved in some cases into new and specifically Jewish labor movements.

From around the 1870s onward, circles of young Jewish intellectuals had been joining forces with Russian revolutionaries in anti-czarist activities. Some of these had come from Haskalah circles and some from the Russian universities which had increased the rate of acceptance of Jewish students. By the late nineteenth century there was already a modest body of university-aged Jewish youth who grew up in a Russian cultural environment.

The most important Jewish labor movement, and the one whose cultural program resulted in many of the highpoints of twentieth century Yiddish education, literature and culture, is known as the *Bund* (short for *Yidisher arbeter bund*, “Jewish Workers’ Pact” or simply the Jewish Labor Bund as it is known in English). The founding of the Bund in Eastern Europe was overwhelmingly a “Litvak project” though it was soon to become enormously popular in Poland.

The primary creators of the Bund were “Litvak to a man (and woman)” and, it all happened in — Vilna. The city, still the rabbinic-traditionalist Jerusalem of Lithuania (its first Jewish crown), and already the center of “mature Haskalah culture” (a second Jewish crown), of the revival of Hebrew literature (third), was slowly but surely, through the means of the Jewish labor movement, becoming a cultural center of the culture being inspired by that movement, modern Yiddish culture (a fourth crown, which was to come to full maturity in the twentieth century).

The “originator” of the Jewish labor movement, or theoretician of its “pre-Bund phase” was Aaron Liebermann (1845—1880), a native of Luna, Lithuania (now Lunna, northwest of Pinsk, in Belarus) whose family lived in Bialystok and Suwalk (now Suwalki, Poland). His background was that of a Maskil. He obtained a teacher’s diploma in Vilna in 1867, studied in St. Petersburg, where he befriended Russian revolutionary types, and returned to Vilna, where he put together, in the early 1870s, a revolutionary circle that somehow combined revolution with the old-new Hebrew culture so powerful among the modern circle of scholars in Vilna. He used various pseudonyms, including “Bar Drora” (Aramaic for “son of freedom”). By 1875 he had to leave town when the police got on his tail. After a sojourn in Berlin, he lived in London, where he drew up (in Hebrew) a manifesto for his new socialist association in 1876 (*Agudas hasotsialistim ho-Ivriim* or the Hebrew Socialist Union). Its thirty-eight members, mostly worker emigrants from the Russian Empire, aimed

to spread socialist ideas, fight oppressors, and establish partnerships with other workers' organizations. Its activities were so anti-Jewish establishment that the venerable Anglo-Jewish weekly, *The Jewish Chronicle*, went ahead and accused it of missionary activities. So novel was the idea of Jewish Socialism that it could not be fathomed.

Liebermann settled in Vienna in 1877, and after being imprisoned on charges of revolutionary activities, he was expelled to Germany, expelled again, and resettled in London. In 1880 he moved to America, and, in 1880 committed suicide, apparently over a broken love affair. He left behind a long trail of articles (many in Hebrew), journals, ideas and — ardent followers.

One of them (the “second of the two Aarons”), Aaron Sundelevitch (1852—1923), a native of Vilna, dissented from Liebermann's Hebraism, considering Hebrew a dead language. He had little time for Yiddish too, thinking it had to disappear as the Jews would merge into the greater Russian nation. He was known for his daring exploits on behalf of the Russian *Narodnaia Volia*.

The follow-up came in Vilna. During the 1870s, the “reformed” rabbinical college that had been set up by Uvarov and Lilienthal in Vilna became a hotbed for anti-czarist revolutionary activity. Many in the circle were avid readers of the works of Lev Osipovich Levanda (1835—1888), a native of Minsk, who spent over three decades in Vilna. By the 1890s there were even yeshiva students who were secretly studying revolutionary literature. Hebrew and Yiddish literature contain more than one description of the yeshiva student

with the revolutionary pamphlet hidden under his copy of the *Gemora*.

The crucial year was 1897. That was the year, of course, when Theodor Herzl convened the very public First Zionist Congress at Basel, Switzerland, launching the organized movement that was to result in the State of Israel (though groups of East European Jews had been settling the land for some time, and reviving Hebrew culture both at home and in Palestine).

That same year, the Jewish Labor Bund was secretly founded in an attic of a little wooden house in Vilna. Thirteen (some say fifteen) dedicated revolutionaries gathered to unite the many strands of Jewish Socialism into a single movement which they called “The General Jewish Labor Alliance in Russia, Poland and Lithuania” or for short, the *Bund*. Those meetings were held from the 8th to the 10th of October, 1897. Most historians consider the moving force to have been Arkady Kremer (1865—1935), a native of Svintsyán (now Švenčionys, Lithuania, north of Vilnius).

In its early years, many facets of Bundism were still fluid, including the future “primary” divide between democratic socialism which eschews all violence, and revolutionary communism which believes it a necessary component. One of the Bund's early sensations was the bootmaker, Hirsh Lekert (1880—1902), a native of Hanúshik (Onuškis, Lithuania). On May Day 1902, the hated czarist governor of Vilna, Von Wahl, ordered the arrest and brutalization of peaceful demonstrators, of whom twenty-six (six Poles and twenty Jews) were mercilessly flogged and hu-

miliated. The Bund decided on an assassination plot to avenge the workers' honor. Young Hirsh Lekert volunteered, and shot at Von Wahl as he settled in to his coach, wounding him lightly in the left hand and right foot. Lekert, cut out for bootmaking rather than marksmanship was hanged on June 10th 1902. His life and death (and especially his last hours, being led across the Green Bridge to Shnípeshok to be shot, and his eloquent rejection of the rabbi's plea to him to beg forgiveness), became the stuff of modern secular Lithuanian Jewish legend. Lekert became a subject for many poems by Yiddish writers. The Bund, however, turned away emphatically from the tactics of violence and assassinations, and became bitterly opposed to the communist movements that advocated violent overthrow of regimes.

Some believe that Arkady Kramer's wife Pati Kremer (Matle Srednitzky) was the first to introduce the notion of the Yiddish language, and Yiddish culture, as central to the Bund's ideas. Born in 1867, she was to perish in the Vilna Ghetto in 1943.

But it was another early woman leader of the Bund who was most pivotal to its conversion from a purely political social-democratic movement to one embracing the language and culture of the Jewish masses. She was a native of Minsk, Malka Lifschitz (1880—1943), better known as Esther Frumkin, or just *Esther*, as *nom-de-guerre*. At the Chernowitz Language Conference of 1908, it was Esther who introduced the “radical” resolution proclaiming Yiddish to be *the* national language of the Jewish people. Although it lost out to

the “moderate” resolution (proclaiming Yiddish to be *a* national language of the Jewish people), “Esther’s resolution,” proposed on Tuesday 1 September 1908, has become part of the lore of modern Yiddish culture, and her unbounded love for the Yiddish language served as an impetus to the incorporation into the Bund's goals (and immediate practical program) of education, literature, press and scholarship, not to mention the very *notion* of Yiddish as a national language on the level of those of the rising nations of Europe.

In the coming years, the Bund was to crystallize in various directions. On the political front it was to become decidedly anti-communist, anti-Zionist and anti-religious. These exclusions (each weaker or stronger in various places or periods) left open the path of nonviolent socialism and social democracy. Its theory was summarized by the Yiddish neologism *dó-ikayt* (“here-ness”), implying a rejection of plans for migration to another homeland, and by implication, a rejection of the “otherworldliness” of traditional Judaism.

The ins and outs, and ups and downs of the political history of the Bund are recorded in an extensive literature on the subject (see the bibliography at the end of this volume for some introductory works). What is important for the history of Lithuanian Jewish culture is the role the Bund played in the twentieth century rise of Yiddish to the status of the national languages of the smaller nations of Europe. That role is often understated for political reasons. The Bund's central philosophy that Jewish life and culture in Eastern Europe would be secured by social democracy and cultural

autonomy within the existing nation-states was brutally and irrevocably undermined by the Holocaust. The political correctness of much of modern Jewish intellectual life sometimes precludes forthrightness; in other words, well-intentioned champions of the new popularity of Yiddish can make it difficult for cultural historians to admit that so much of what modern secular Yiddish culture attained in the twentieth century was given impetus by a movement that opposed both Zionism and religion, the two central pillars of current Judaism.

Rather than pursue the abstract point further, it might be more appropriate to point to some tangibles. Chief among them is infrastructure. A powerful political movement (at its height the Bund had hundreds of thousands of supporters) is in a position to set up schools, publications and institutions in the sphere of language and culture, much more so than scattered idealists. Beyond that, the Bundist love for Yiddish from the early years of the twentieth century onward inspired some of the leading talents in the field of Yiddish in the twentieth century. Strange as it may seem, that is also a “tangible” in so far as the “miracle” of turning a folk language into a major European literary language in so short a time required that many top talents feel confident that they are dealing with a viable culture. In large part thanks to the Bund, they were.

One of those talents was the great Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich (1894—1969), a native of Goldingen, Courland (now Kuldīga, Latvia). Bundism infused him with a life-long love of Yiddish, but far from becoming a politician of any

kind, he dedicated his life to building the academic study of Yiddish, with emphasis on the history of the Yiddish language. He completed his doctorate in Marburg in 1923, and settled in Vilna. There he married Regina, the daughter of the legendary Dr. Tsemakh Shabad, who had been deeply influenced by the Bund, and who used his prestige and his resources to establish journals, schools and other institutions. Both men played instrumental roles in setting up the world’s first major Yiddish academic institution, the Yivo, in Vilna in 1925 (see p. 287). The name is an acronym for *Yidisher vísnschaftlekher institút* (Yiddish Scientific Institute). Today it is the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York, a primary resource center for East European Jewish Studies. A majority of its initial, prewar constituency was deeply influenced by the Bund’s policy on developing the folk language to the status of a national language.

Another example is the great Yiddish publisher Boris Kletskin (1875—1937), native of a small shtetl, Haródlitsh (now Haradzzišča, Belarus), who moved to Vilna where the cultural component of Bundism led him to think big. He set up the Kletskin publishing house, which published a significant number of high quality works in literature, scholarship, translations from world literature, and education, almost singlehandedly providing Yiddish High Culture with an instant new library. Among his major achievements are the volume that launched Yiddish studies, published in Vilna in 1913, and the world’s premier Yiddish literary magazine in the interwar period, Warsaw’s *Literárishe bléter*.

In the field of education too, the primary enablers of the new secular Yiddish school systems in the Polish republic were Bundists. The Warsaw centered school system was called *Tsisho*, acronym for *Tsentrále yidishe shul organizatsye* (Central Yiddish School Organization). Its Vilna affiliate was known as the *Tse-be-ka*, from the initials for *Tsentráler bildungs-komitét* (Central Education Committee).

There were other political movements that contributed substantially to modern Yiddish culture in the sense of motivating and enabling a critical mass of writers, teachers, educators and cultural leaders. Most of them are well forgotten by today's Jews and unknown to anyone but a handful of academics who specialize in this branch of European Jewish cultural history. One such movement was Territorialism which sought a territory for the Jews that would not necessarily be in the Land of Israel. One of its major branches was steeped in East European Yiddishism, and it sought a Yiddish speaking homeland. Its most famous spokespeople were two brothers from Dvinsk (now Daugavpils, Latvia): the Territorialist thinker and dreamer Yitskhok-Nakhmen Steinberg (1888—1957) and philosopher Aaron Steinberg (1891—1975). Yitskhok-Nakhmen's colorful biography includes a brief stint as Lenin's justice minister in the 1917 coalition government. But he quit in February 1918, protesting the introduction of the death penalty. In the 1930s he negotiated with tribal and other leaders in sparsely populated parts of Australia, dreaming of his Yid-

dish speaking homeland. His book *Gelébt un gekhólemt in Oystrálie* ("Lived and Dreamed in Australia," Melbourne 1943) remains a classic work of the movement.

The Anarchist movement also inspired many Yiddish writers and literary magazines. Its publication in New York, *Di fráye árbeter shtime* ("The Free Workers' Voice") was considered one of the truly fine Yiddish periodicals for many decades. Its actual contributions were in the realm of creative literature, not innovative Anarchist theories. . . .

Soviet Russia and Soviet communism also played an important role in Yiddish literature, especially in the 1920s and early 1930s. For a time in the twenties, the world of Yiddish thought of the brand new and full-of-hope Soviet Union as a kind of paradise for Yiddish, a place where Yiddish writers were actually paid by the government and journals and institutions were supported. The 1920s and very early thirties were a period of minimum interference in the content of the writing, and a golden period which led to the production of many masterpieces by Soviet Yiddish writers. So successful was the Soviet Yiddish enterprise that top writers, believing all the propaganda, actually migrated to the new country from wherever they were living in the 1920s. Master poet Moyshe Kulbak emigrated from Vilna to Minsk in 1928. The great novelist Dovid Bergelson made the move from New York and Copenhagen (with stints in other European cities) — to Moscow.

In the czarist years

Throughout their two thousand year diaspora history, Jews have been guided by the Talmudic principle expressed in the Aramaic phrase *díno d'malkúso díno* (“The law of the government is the law”) which has come to mean loyalty to the state in which one lives. It is in any case only natural that a peaceful minority that has nothing to do with arms, and would not be remotely competent to use them, would follow such a policy. The principle became part of diaspora Jewish culture. There was gratitude toward states that allowed religious and economic freedom, and a willingness in the face of violent, intolerant regimes to perish rather than accept conversion, the principle known as *kidesh hashém* (*kidush-hashem*, literally “sanctification of the name of God”). There are no “Jewish revolutions” in diaspora Jewish history.

As ever, there is a point where simplistic clarity nevertheless fades, and the complexities of reality come into play: Whom to side with in times of conflict between two would-be rulers of the territory where Jews lived? Whenever possible, Jewish communities stayed out of the fray, sitting tight and hoping for the best. But it was not always possible to “avoid decisions on such matters.” And, in any case, sitting on the sidelines does not mean to say that there were not preferences.

In the case of the Litvaks, it is probably fair to say that in the centuries of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, both before and after the 1569 Union of Lublin (with Poland), the Jews in the Duchy — the Litvaks — knew that their lot was much better than in many other parts of Europe (spiritually and in terms of security, if not economically). That must have been as true in the days of Witold's charters of 1388 and 1389 as in 1648 and 1649, during the Chmielnitski massacres in the Ukraine. Of course there were setbacks, like the short-lived Lithuanian expulsion of 1495, but there was little over the centuries that stands comparison with much of the rest of Europe.

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Litvaks were “shifted” from the rule of the Grand Duchy — as it then was, a component in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth — to that of the Russian czars. The territorial takeovers came in three chunks, in 1772, 1793 and 1795, known to historians as the “Partitions of Poland” which of course meant the dissolution of both Polish and Lithuanian statehood, to be reconstituted (in very different form) only after the end of the First World War.

From the 1790s onward there was talk — always followed sooner or later (often in zigzags), by harsh action — of restrictions on movement (the Pale of Settlement); expulsion from the hamlets; gross interference in the internal educational institutions of the communities; double taxation (!). A few decades later came the drafting of little boys for twenty-five years’ army service (the cantonists).

It was only natural that some Jews would join the various opposition efforts, and indeed there was Jewish participation in each and every major revolt against czarist rule. Although the tiniest minority of Jews participated, it led to the emergence of high-profile figures.

One of them was Berek Joselewicz, who was born in Kretinga, Lithuania, around 1770, and played a noted role in Kosciuszko’s uprising in 1794. He had served as court factor to Bishop Massalski of Vilna, and later moved to Warsaw. During the uprising, he and Jozef Aronowicz set up a Jewish cavalry regiment of some five hundred men. He eventually fled to France, but returned to fight for Poland. He fell in 1809 in the battle against Austria.

But Joselewicz was one of those ultra-rare human commodities in his time: the “really culturally assimilated” Jewish citizen.

For the unassimilated overwhelming majority, the goal was to make the best of the situation under the rulers that be, and to seek the most cordial possible relations with them. One tradition that developed, particularly in Lithuania, was for experts in Hebrew, often poets and rhymesters, to compose special pieces in honor of happy occasions of the governments and their rulers.



Yivo

Berek Joselewicz of Kretinga, a hero of the Polish uprising against the Russian Empire in 1794



Leyzer Ran Collection

A Hebrew pamphlet in honor of the wedding of the czar's son

This pamphlet is typical of the tradition. The title page reads: “Voice of the Celebrating Masses. May it be told in a voice of singing and thanksgiving. The prestige and honor felt in the joy of the holiday celebrated by the people, the residents of Vilna, on the day of the wedding of the son who will in the coming generation be the father to all the land of Russia and its extremities. He is the great prince, son of the czar, Alexander Nikolayevich, in the year *May Nikolai and Alexander live* [=5]601 = 1841].”

At the same time, the obscurity of Hebrew nuance enabled these occasions to be used for subtle fun, sometimes even satire. Some of the vocabulary of this text is drawn from the biblical Book of Esther, read on the costume-and-drink Jewish holiday of Purim.

It comes from the descriptions of the court of the merry but not-so-very clever King Ahasuerus of Persia. Russian authorities would not have been overly happy to discover that the Jews are using Hebrew phrases to quietly compare their czar to “the foolish king” Ahasuerus. More innocent merriment, perhaps, comes from the recording of the Hebrew year of publication by the traditional means of finding a Biblical passage or other suitable phrase whose numeric total (in the Hebrew alphabetic numbering system) comes to the same value as that year. In this case, the author came up with the words “May Nikolai and Alexander live!” the letters of which come to [5]601 (the thousands column being understood in the abbreviated reckoning), in other words — 1841.

Revolutionaries



Yivo Jewish Labor Bund Collection

The "Two Aarons"

Aaron Lieberman (standing)

and Aaron Sundelevich

Jewish socialism is generally traced to "the two Aarons." They were Aaron Lieberman (1844—1880) of Luna (now Lunna, northwest of Pinsk, in Belarus), and Aaron Sundelevich (1852—1923), a native of Vilna.

Arkady Kremer (1865—1935), a native of Svintsyan (now Švenčionys, Lithuania), was a major figure in the founding of the Jewish Labor Bund in Vilna.



Yivo Jewish Labor Bund Collection

Arkady Kremer



Yivo Jewish Labor Bund Collection

The Vilna house where the Bund was secretly founded by around fifteen revolutionaries in October 1897.



Yivo Jewish Labor Bund Collection

Esther (Malka Lifschitz,
Esther Frankin)

The electric personality of “Esther” (= Malka Lifschitz = Esther Frumkin, 1880—1943), a native of Minsk, was a major factor in the phenomenal growth of the Jewish Labor Bund. Her fiery speeches inspired many thousands to join and to believe in the possibilities for democracy and cultural autonomy for minorities. She was one of the main forces leading to the inclusion of Yiddish and Yiddish culture into the Bund’s ideology in the early years of the twentieth century. She stirred up an international storm at the Chernowitz Yiddish Language Conference of 1908, when she sensationally demanded that Yiddish be declared “the national Jewish language.” The resolution passed proclaimed it a national Jewish language, sidestepping the then-burning issue of attitudes toward the revival of spoken Hebrew.

Hirsh Lekert (1880—1902) was a young Jewish shoemaker and revolutionary who volunteered to assassinate the hated czarist governor of Vilna, Von Wahl, after the governor had flogged and humiliated the workers (non-Jewish and Jewish) who participated in the 1902 May Day demonstration in the city. He was no marksman and barely grazed Von Wahl. Lekert was rapidly sentenced to death. The elaborate ritual of his being taken across the Green Bridge to a military area in Shnípeshok (now the Šnipiškės district of Vilnius), to be hanged at 2:10 AM on June 10th 1902, became an important symbolic marker in the Jewish labor movement. For its part, the Bund stuck to peaceful and democratic socialism from that day onward. Lekert was a native of Hanúseshik (now Onuškis, Lithuania).



Yivo Jewish Labor Bund Collection

Hirsh Lekert



Yivo Jewish Labor Bund Collection

A group of Bundists in Goldingen (now Kuldīga, Latvia) in 1913. The man in the white shirt is Max Weinreich (1894—1969) who abandoned political activity and went on to become the leading Yiddish scholar of the twentieth century.



Yivo Jewish Labor Bund Collection

Tzipke Safro, a prominent revolutionary in Vitebsk, wounded in a demonstration during the uprising of 1905.

Chapter 13

In Four New Republics

After hundreds of years in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (and after 1569 in the GDL component of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), the Litvaks had passed to Russian czarist rule in an east-to-west progression lasting about a quarter of a century in the late eighteenth century (the three Partitions of Poland — 1772, 1793 and 1795). Most Lithuanian Jews (in the two western sectors), were “reassigned” to the new regime over a short span of just a few years, during the second and third partitions.

Nearly all the Litvaks were under German rule for several years during World War I, and found themselves in the middle of a host of bitter and bloody conflicts in its immediate aftermath. Many family traditions include recollections of things getting much worse in 1918 when the “official” First World War between the erstwhile great powers ran its course and the new local armies vied to achieve their new nationalist states based largely on conceptualizations of varying degrees of ethnic purity. These nationalisms were tempered in part by the western powers (and particularly the United States under President

Woodrow Wilson), who included recognition of minority rights as a condition for recognition and assistance, and in part by perceptions that certain minorities could be useful in the construction of the new economies and general recognition abroad.

When the guns finally fell silent in the early 1920s (at different times in various localities), the Litvaks, for most of six centuries under a single nation-state, suddenly found themselves residents and citizens of *four* principal new political entities (with two more on the peripheries). The Jewish populations of three of them — Lithuania, Latvia and the Belorussian Republic of the Soviet Union — were virtually all Litvak (though by then many Latvian Jews, especially in the west, had been Germanized after centuries of coexistence of Lithuanian Jewish and German Jewish culture). The fourth, the interwar Polish Republic, comprised the heartland of Polish Jewry, but its northeastern sector contained much of the very heartland of Lithuanian Jewry as well. Such bastions of Lithuanian Jewish culture as Vilna — the eternal spiritual capital of Jewish Lithuania —

and the cities Bialystok, Suvalk (Suwalki), Grodna, Brisk (Brest) and Pinsk were all in the new Polish Republic. In fact, four out of the five “principal cities” of the eighteenth century version of the Council of Lithuania (Brisk, Grodna, Pinsk, Vilna) were in Poland, and only one (Slutsk) in the Belorussian S.S.R. Not a single one was in independent interwar Lithuania, which included only the “far west” of traditional Lita.

During most of the interwar period, the border between the Polish and Lithuanian republics was closed (principally over the bitter “Vilna dispute” between the two states); relations between the Belorussian S.S.R. and Poland were likewise dim, with a roughly equal frenzy on both sides of the border (suspicions of communist agitators in Poland, and of “Polish spies” in the USSR), especially in the 1930s. Beyond that, each of the new republics had its own national language, based on the native language of the ethnic majority that was now coming into its own nation-state in each case: Latvian in Latvia, Lithuanian in Lithuania, Polish in Poland and Belorussian (Belarusian) in the Belorussian SSR (though Russian, the inter-republic national Soviet language, was very strong too). The days of “some kind of Russian” as a koine or lingua franca were over (at least until the onset of World War II when the Soviets overran eastern Poland, in 1939, and went on to “incorporate” all three Baltic states in 1940).

This had to affect not only the cultural life of the Jewish communities, but their very self definition. “Suddenly” (if to judge by historical

measures), the average Litvak in Vilna was under more than a little pressure to define him or herself as a “Polish Jew” or “Polish citizen” though in Jewish culture the person was at the “opposite” end of the cultural, folkloristic and dialect divide within East European Jewry. The Latvian Jew, who previously had Russian and perhaps German in addition to the native Yiddish and traditional Hebrew, had to master Latvian and was now a citizen of Latvia rather than say a “Courland Litvak.” Only in Lithuania, did the traditional term Litvak jibe well with the *name* of the new nation, Lithuania — *Lietuva* — though many had problems with the literary and formal forms (if not all forms) of the Lithuanian language, having previously had more personal contact with Russian, Polish and in the west, German. In the Belorussian Republic, the Litvak was now a citizen of that “experimental superstate,” the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. At the same time that some of the principal borders were closed, the new configuration made way for new interrelationships with other parts of East European Jewry with whom borders were wide open. Vilna and Warsaw were in one country, making way for ease of communication between the Litvaks of north-eastern Poland with the *Poylishe yidn*, the Polish Jews, of most of the rest of Poland. Minsk and Kiev were in one country, making way for open channels between the eastern Litvaks (of the region once known as *Raysn*), and the third great branch, Ukrainian (Volhynian-Podolian-Bessarabian) Jewry on the territory known to Yiddish studies as Southeastern Yiddish.

The Interwar Years: Litvaks Find Themselves in Four New Republics

Scale 1: 5,700,000



Moreover, by then there were large communities of culturally conscious Litvaks in the United States and Canada, Israel, South Africa, and other corners of the globe to which Litvaks had migrated en masse.

In independent Lithuania and Poland, the great centers of Lithuanian Torah learning, whether in Telz (Telšiai, Lithuania), Vilna (then Wilno, Poland, now Vilnius Lithuania; Valozhin (then Volozhin, Poland, now in Belarus), continued very much as before (except without the harassment of the czarist regime!). It is probably fair to say that all the modern movements notwithstanding, the vast majority of Jews remained traditional Ashkenazim, steeped in the beliefs of their forebears, albeit with varying degrees of increased contact with their surroundings and various syntheses of the old and the new (internal as well as external aspects, such as dress or knowledge of the coterritorial non-Jewish languages).

There are certain internal Jewish stereotypes about the four new “republican Litvaks” in the interwar period. Like many other stereotypes, they are exaggerated, but have “something to do” with the truth. The stereotype (for which there is plentiful external evidence) holds that the modernist elements among Jews in the Lithuanian Republic (capital: Kovna or Kaunas) tended principally toward modern Hebrew language and culture, Zionism and the dream of emigration to the reborn ancient Jewish homeland. The modernist Litvaks in the Polish Republic (with Vilna or Wilno as the cultural center and including Brisk/Brest, Bialystok, Grodna, Pinsk, Suwalk), were more in-

clined to Bundism, Yiddishism, and diasporism, and enjoyed close links with the huge block of Polish Jewry (whose centers included Warsaw, Lodz, Cracow, and other great Polish cities).

In the Belorussian Republic of the Soviet Union, there was little choice. The early policies of the Soviet regime tolerated religious practice by the older generations on their way out (but not their perpetuation) while building a brand new Yiddish school system, with breathtaking minority rights for Jews and for the new Soviet Yiddish culture under development. For a brief decade and a half or so, a good part of the Jews of Soviet Belorussia were proud to be in a republic where Yiddish was recognized alongside the other national languages, and where the government seemed for a time to be so favorable toward all its national minorities.



What is characteristic for the Litvaks in all four new countries of the interwar period is a remarkable level of cultural activity and creativity. In the non-Soviet countries, both Hebrew and Yiddish literature, education and culture could be developed freely, all in addition of course to the traditional Talmudic culture. The swift achievements of the previously suppressed languages of the national majorities in each served particularly as an inspiration to parallel achievement in the realm of the Jewish vernacular, Yiddish.

Hopes were highest in independent Lithuania which started out with a Ministry of Jew-

ish Affairs, a Jewish National Council and a deeply loyal Jewish population. The council's elected leader, Shimshon (Semyon) Rosenbaum (1860—1934) was a deputy minister of foreign affairs in the first Lithuanian government and among the new country's representatives at the Versailles Peace Conference. He left for Palestine, however, when the agreed structure of autonomy was dismantled. There were other setbacks, especially after the coup of 1926. Still, as the master historian of interwar East European Jewry Ezra Mendelsohn puts it, "Lithuania was a considerably more pleasant place for the Jews" than most of the neighboring countries. And, notwithstanding the dismantling of formal Jewish autonomy and the increasing economic crisis that followed in the 1930s, "in Lithuania autonomous Jewish culture remained, until the very end, stronger and more vigorous than in any other country in Europe, while the Jewish economic situation went from bad to worse." The facts and implications of the experiment with Jewish autonomy in independent Lithuania have now been surveyed in the study by Šarūnas Liekis, *A State within a State? Jewish Autonomy in Lithuania, 1918—1925* (Vilnius 2003).

According to the figures of Israeli scholar Dov Levin, a total of 331 Yiddish and 233 Hebrew periodical publications appeared in independent Lithuania between 1922 and 1940. There were four distinct modern educational movements, all in addition to the traditional *khadórim* (elementary schools) and yeshivas (institutes for higher rabbinic learning). They were known by the names of the organizations that ran them: the *Kultúr-líge* ("Cul-

ture League" by the secular left-leaning Yiddishists); *Yávne* (after the ancient town Yavne, see p. 29, by the traditionalist orthodox); *Tarbút* ("Culture" by the Hebraist Zionists), and a remarkable category that came to be called *di pshóre-shuln* (literally "compromise schools" where curricula from more than one ideology were taught in tandem). For the school year 1920-1921, Levin counts sixteen schools of the *Kultúr-líge*, thirty of *Yávne*, forty-six *Tarbút* and sixty-eight *pshóre-shuln*.

In the Vilna region of northeastern Poland, there were just under ten thousand children enrolled in modern Jewish elementary schools belonging to six different educational movements in the 1929-1930 school year, on the figures assembled by the major interwar Vilna educator Moyshe Shalit (1885—1941). The breakdown is 9.8% in Talmud-Torahs (which combined traditional content with some modern methodology), 10.3% in traditional, unmodernized *khadórim*, 11.3% in Orthodox schools, 11.7% in secular Yiddishist schools, 22.7% in modern Jewish schools stressing command of Polish, and 23.2% in the best financed system, the Zionist Tarbut schools. The remainder (11%) were enrolled in special Jewish secondary schools.

On the count of Leyzer Ran, there were seventeen Yiddish dailies in Vilna alone in the years between 1906 and 1940, and twenty-four serious periodicals.

For Latvia, Z. Michaeli counts over ten thousand pupils in the 1928-1929 school year, attending schools where the language of instruction was Yiddish (48%), Hebrew (31%), German

(14%) or Russian (7%). The Latvian language was taught in nearly all of them as well, but was not generally the main language of instruction for other subjects.

The Litvak territory of the Soviet Union's interwar borders comprised virtually all of the Belorussian Republic, hefty chunks of eastern Ukraine and small sections of western Russia. The Belorussian Republic was much smaller than today's Belarus; what is now western Belarus was then mostly northeastern Poland: the cities Grodna, Brisk (Brest), Pinsk and Vilna were all then in Poland (known as Grodno, Brzesc, Pinsk and Wilno respectively; with the exception of today's Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, the rest are in Belarus). The interwar Soviet Belorussian territory was more or less circumscribed then by (going clockwise) Minsk, Polotsk, Vitebsk, Mohilev, Gomel, Mozer, Bobruisk and Slutsk.

Minsk became the "Litvak center" of Soviet Yiddish literature in the 1920s. Its writers, educators and cultural initiators had come from the same sort of Lithuanian shtetl backgrounds as those on the western side of the Soviet—non-Soviet divide, but instead of ending up in a "normal" interwar east-central European state such as Lithuania, Latvia or Poland, they found themselves in a corner of the one-in-the-world Soviet experiment, with its initial highs, and then, from the mid 1930s onward, its progressively brutal destruction by the very government that set it all up.

In the field of education it boasted Yiddish teachers' institutes in Minsk and Vitebsk. Its Yiddish school system had 31,340 students enrolled

in the 1930—1931 school year (representing 55.5% of the school-aged population).

The central literary personality, and in a society where poets were held in the highest esteem, the "Yiddish King of Minsk" (and all Soviet Belorussia) was the very talented (and very communist) Izzy Kharik, a native of Zembin, a shtetl not far from Minsk. A shoemaker's son, he rose in the 1920s to acquire rapid fame in the new Soviet Union and beyond. His poetic talents, including a mastery of the application of folkloric material to modernist poetry, were almost all dedicated to the Revolution. Among his most famous works from the 1920s are *Naye erd* ("New Earth") and *Minsker blótes* ("The Mudpools of Minsk"). He edited *Shtern*, an influential literary monthly, and even had a sort of festschrift dedicated to him in 1935. During the first great purge of 1937, he was arrested, tortured and murdered, as were most of the Minsk circle, effectively bringing to an end the very brief seventeen years or so of state supported Soviet Litvak culture.

In the realm of elementary education, the Jewish section of the Communist Party, which ruthlessly suppressed both religious and Hebrew culture, set up a Yiddish school system that catered for 36,650 children in the 1932-1933 school year. Shortly after the purge of the writers, scholars and cultural leaders of Minsk in 1937, the school system was closed down. On July 3rd 1938 the Bureau of the Communist Party's Central Committee ordered the closure of Jewish educational institutions by September 1st of that year.



According to the research of Yitshak Arad, the number of Litvaks in their native territory (in other words, those who had not emigrated), was split between the new republics as follows on the eve of the Second World War:

Belorussian Republic of the USSR:	375,092
Latvian Republic:	94,000
Lithuanian Republic:	147,000
Polish Republic (Litvak regions of Bialystok, Polesie, Novogradok and Wilno):	504,991

In addition to these four principal republics, there were Litvak minorities among the Jews of the Russian and Ukrainian republics of the Soviet Union:

Russia (Litvak regions in the Nevel and Lubavitch districts):	4,247
Ukraine (Litvak region in the Chernigov district):	31,887

This made for an estimated grand total, on Arad's figures, of 1,157,217 Litvaks, on known figures, in the republics of interwar Europe before the Holocaust. Over ninety percent perished in the Holocaust. Alas, the highest percentage of Jews killed in any country in Europe was in Lithuania itself (in the mid nineties), a consequence of the massive enthusiastic participation in the killing by Lithuanian nationalist "activists". In many localities, violence against Jewish civilians broke out in the days following the collapse of Soviet authority on 22 June 1941 and before the Germans had arrived. Later, when the Nazis organized the mass murders methodically, the overwhelming majority of killers ("Jew shooters") were enthusiastic Lithuanian volunteers. At the same time, one must never forget the inspirational bravery of those who risked themselves and their families to rescue a Jewish neighbor.

In Four New Republics

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For many centuries the vast majority of Litvaks lived in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. And then, with the three partitions of Poland-Lithuania in the late eighteenth century, they came in stages to live in the czarist Russian empire.

After World War I, however, they were split between four new republics: Lithuania, Poland, the Belorussian republic of the Soviet Union, and Latvia (with smaller concentrations in eastern Ukraine and western Russia). Each of these countries had its own national language and new educational systems (and language laws) designed to develop its own culture and literature. Yiddish language and culture were at a peak during this period in all these countries, and new forms of bilingualism and multilingualism were gaining various degrees of acceptance throughout the region. Yiddish had the “most” legal rights (including use in courts and post offices and official signs and seals) in Belorussia for about a decade (from the mid twenties to the mid thirties), before the Stalin regime’s brutal destruction of Yiddish culture in the late 1930s.

While all four republics produced important Litvak Yiddish writers, it was Vilna (then Wilno) that became the world center of Yiddish scholarship, thanks in no small part to the establishment there of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in 1925. Independent Lithuania, centered in Kaunas (Kovna) became a major center for modern Hebrew education. Traditional rabbinic culture flourished throughout the region except in Belorussia where it was harshly repressed.

In the Lithuanian Republic



Dov Levin

The Ikhiltshik Brothers' Tailors in Vilkomir (Ukmergė)



Lithuanian Academy of Sciences

A primer in Lithuanian language for Hebrew schools, published in Maryampol (Mariampolė) in 1928



Vilnius University Library

Lithuanian-Yiddish dictionary published in Kovna (Kaunas) in 1923



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Hebrew secondary school in Utyan (Utena)

In the Polish Republic

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Leyzer Ran Collection

Traditional Jewish hostel for the poor (*Hakhnaset Orachim*, literally "Reception for Guests") in Slonim (now in Belarus) welcomes travellers in Polish and Yiddish



Leyzer Ran Collection

A hairdresser in Oshwene (then Oshmiana; now Voinava, Belarus) looks for clients in Yiddish and Polish



photo by Maynard Owen Williams in *National Geographic* (vol. 73, no. 6, 1938, p. 779)

Vilna (then Wilno) always spoke in many languages...



Leyzer Ran Collection

Jewish newsstand in Vilna

In the Belorussian Republic of the U.S.S.R.



Yivo

Minsk Train Station welcomes travelers in Belarusan, Russian, Polish and Yiddish!



A Jewish collective farm in the late 1920s



The Yiddish State Theater of Belorussia in Minsk housed in a former synagogue welcomes its patrons in Belarusan and Yiddish



Closeup of the theater's name

In the Latvian Republic



Yiddish teachers of
Riga in 1921

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Yivo



לשנה טובה תכתבו

Tomasz Wisniewski Collection
Białystok

Jewish New Year's card from Białystok



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection
Białystok

Dvinsk (Dinaburg, interwar) and current Daugapils

Posing for the camera in a shtetl

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The shtetl Michaleshik (pronounced Mikháleshik) was in the heart of the province of Vilna in the czarist period. In 1885, there were officially 843 inhabitants in the village, of whom around 90% were Jewish. It is a picturesque little village set in a sharp bend of the Viliya River which envelops it on two sides. For generations access from across the river was via a ferry on drag ropes. After the First World War, a bridge was built.

These photographs are from the period between the start of the First World War and the time just before the outbreak of World War II. In the interwar years Michaleshik was part of Poland. Today (known as Michalishki) it is in Belarus, not far from the border with modern Lithuania.



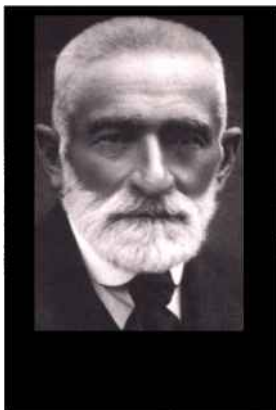
The village blacksmith, *Chaim der Shmid* ("Chaim the Smith"). His full name was Chaim Weinstein. With his wife Basye (born Gubersky).

Genuine “natural photos” of shtetl Jews are hard to come by. The shtetl was poor and when a traveling photographer came to town, it was a kind of holiday. People ran for their best clothing. They were moreover in awe of the magical camera device, and often froze up in a fixed expression. The photographer frequently brought his own props, such as fancy clothing, an elaborate chair, a bicycle or tricycle, cardboard painted backgrounds and other odds and ends. The rowboat is for real, however. Rowing and swimming were beloved sports on the Viliya River, which flows into Vilna (Vilnius), and then joins the Nieman at Kovna (Kaunas). On the Lithuanian side of the border the river is now known as the Neris.

Most of these photographs were collected by Michaleshik native Esther Livingston, now of Los Angeles, California, with the assistance of her son, Professor Edward H. Livingston (UCLA), as part of an internet project to preserve the memory of the Jewish life of her native town.



Rowing on the Viliya River



Menke Katz Collection

Aron-Velvel Gubersky, one of the leading timber merchants in town before the First World War. Like many, he was left impoverished after the war. Trees from the deep forests nearby would be cut down, and their logs rolled into the Viliya, knocked together into rafts during the spring thaw, and floated (with a sort of captain in a little booth built on to the rafts), to Vilna, Kovna, and the Baltic Sea, where they were usually loaded onto ships for faraway timber markets. Aron-Velvel died in the mid 1920s. He had ten children.



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Franke, the last of Aaron-Veksel Gubersky's ten children, perished in the Holocaust with her young family.



Menke Katz Collection

Another grandchild, Menke Katz, who went on to become "the poet of Michalestik" in America where his family migrated in 1920 (see p. 267). He died in 1991.



Aaron-Veksel's grandson, Elshik Chait. The picture was for his bride, Dveirke Ozhinsky, but he died at the age of seventeen, before the wedding. Dveirke perished in the Holocaust in 1941, but her niece, Tila Bikson Guterman survived, and was the last Jew in Svintyánke (Svencionėliai) until her death in 2007.

Unnamed residents of the village of Michaleshik...
from the Esther and Edward Livingstone Collection in Los Angeles, California



3.3.3



Aron-Velvel Gubersky's
granddaughter Blinke Rogovsky
(later Lacer). Her mandolin is for
real. Mandolin playing (using a
local system of numbers for notes)
was very widespread. She
emigrated as a young woman to
Israel and lived to the mid 1990s.



Unnamed residents of the
village of Michaleshik...
*from the Esther and Edward
Livingstone Collection in Los
Angeles, California*



Unnamed residents of the
village of Michaleshik...
*from the Esther and Edward
Livingstone Collection in Los
Angeles, California*



Unnamed residents of
The village of Michaleshik...
*From the 'Abrashke Rogovsky'
Collection (Tel Aviv)*



Litvak women in action



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Ballet dancers in Vilna

Leyer Ron Collection



Leyzer Ran Collection

Basketball players in Vilna



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Bundists in Volkavishk (now Vilkyavikis, Lithuania)



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Clothing designers in Glubok (now Hlybokaje, Belarus)



Leyzer Ran Collection

In a movement to alleviate poverty
in Vilna



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection - Bialystok

Kindergarten teachers
in Kovna



Tomasz Wójcikowski, 1918

Wojciechowski
Wojciechowski



Tomasz Wójcikowski, 1918

Wojciechowski
Wojciechowski



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Students in Volkovsk
(now Volhynsk, Belarus)



Leizer Ran Collection

Orthodox activists in Vilna



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Zionist activists in Memel
(now Klaipėda, Lithuania)

Chapter 14

Lithuanian Jewish Art

The tradition of modern Lithuanian Jewish artists is usually traced to sculptor Mark Antokolsky (1842—1902), a native of Vilna who rose to become a highly acclaimed sculptor in the Russian Empire. Some of his work draws upon the experience of Lithuanian Jewish culture, such as his *Talmudic Debate* (1869), though his most famous themes spanned time, history and religions. He is best known for his *Mephisto*, *Jesus the Crucified* and *Peter the Great*.

In music, the violinist Jascha Heifetz (1901—1987) is usually cited as the foremost representative of Lithuanian Jewry.

But it is important to distinguish between Litvaks who succeeded in the arts (or for that matter in any field), whether in their place of birth or abroad, on the one hand, and, on the other, Litvaks whose art is inextricably linked with Lithuanian Jewish culture. The categories are, as so much in art, not very easy to distinguish. Chaim Soutine (1893—1943), for example, a native of Smilovitsh, southeast of Minsk (now Smilavičy, Belarus) who studied in Vilna before moving to Paris, drew his overt inspiration from his later Parisian environment, but who is to say or know what effect his Lithuanian Jewish youth may have had? Would he have been “Soutine” had he hailed from someplace else?

If we are to adhere to the stricter definition of Lithuanian Jewish culture, the most famous phenomenon is the celebrated coterie of artists who hailed from the Vitebsk region or studied art at Vitebsk in the years before, during and after the Russian Revolution (some of them explicitly part of the “Vitebsk school,” some not). This group is best known for its most renowned



Everiskaya Entsiklopediya (St. Petersburg, 1912, vol. 1, p. 785)

Fragment of sketch

for Antokolsky's

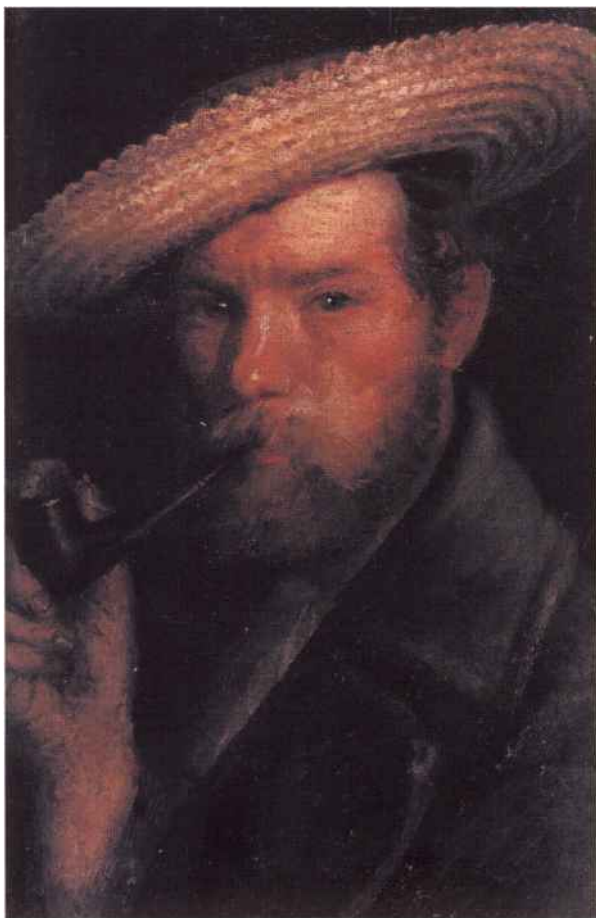
Talmudic Debate

exponent, Marc Chagall (born in Lyozna in 1887), but it produced an array of other talented twentieth century artists, among them Meyer Akselrod (1902—1970); Abraham Brazer (1892–1942); Anna Abelevna Kagan (1902—1974); Yelena Kabischer-Yakerson (1903—1990); Anatoly Kaplan (1902—1980); Lazar Khidekel (1904—1986); Lev Leitman (1896—1974); El Lissitzky (1890—1941); Abraham Manievich (1881—1942); Isaac Milchin (1894—±1941); Yefim Minin (1898—1940); David Yakerson (1896—1947); Solomon Yudovin (1892—1954); and numerous others.

The places where they were born and raised, and where they turned to “Lithuanian Jewish art,” as we may call it, are nearly all in the spiritual heartland of Shneur-Zalmen’s Chabad-Lubavitch movement (see pp. 127-137). Shneur-Zalmen and Chagall (originally Segal) were both born in Lyozna, near Vitebsk (though Shneur-Zalmen came to be associated with Lyadi, and Chagall with Vitebsk itself). Without claiming too much, it is plausible to argue that the “freer roaming spirit seeking the kabbalistic heavens” of the Lithuanian Hasidim in the far east of Lita lent itself to the re-expression of everyday (eastern) Lithuanian Jewish life in those specific types of art actually developed.

But the originator and teacher of the entire group (and Chagall’s first teacher) was a Litvak from the Vilna region in central Lita, whose life’s wanderings took him up and down the territory of Jewish Lithuania. He was Yehuda (Yuri) Pen, whose biography has been admirably reconstructed in G. Kasovsky’s *Artists from Vitebsk. Yehuda Pen and his Pupils*.

Pen was born in 1854 in Novo-Aleksandrovsik (affectionately known in Yiddish as *Sénderke*, after the diminutive of Alexander; it is now Zarasai, Lithuania). As a boy he drew many ornaments, borders, and designs for traditional books and manuscripts, and eventually started painting human objects and scenes from life. With the exception of the scribal arts, and synagogue decorations, art was not one of the genres of traditional Ashkenazic Jewry. But as fate would have it, a relative of Pen’s was a sign-writer (one step closer!) in nearby Dvinsk (now Daugavpils in Latvia, across the border from Zarasai; in those years just a matter of crossing from Kovna to Courland gubernias within the Russian Empire). Pen left for his relative in Dvinsk in 1867 and ended up as an assistant to a housepainter. He befriended the modernist Pumpiansky family (best known for its “government rabbi” Aaron Elijah, 1835—1893) who supported him. He also befriended a student of St. Petersburg’s Academy of Art who was vacationing in Dvinsk. Pen left for St. Petersburg in 1879, where he studied art intensively and befriended a circle of budding Jewish artists.



Belarusian Museum of Arts (Minsk)

Pen's Self portrait with a Straw Hat (1890s)

After completing his studies, he returned to Novo-Aleksandrovsik in 1886, moving on to Dvinsk and then Riga. He settled for some years in Kreitzburg (now Krustpils, Latvia) in the 1890s. Pen's friends and admirers helped set him up with his own drawing school in Vitebsk in 1897. Chagall was later to record in his memoirs the overriding importance of the day in his boyhood when he chanced upon a sign advertizing Pen's drawing school. A number of Pen's pupils who went on to become major artists (Lissitzky and Yudovin among them) had taken part in An-sky's folkloristic expedition to the Ukraine between 1912 and 1915, and found inspiration in traditional Jewish religious art (synagogues, cemeteries, book and *pinkes* design, and so forth).

In 1917, when Chagall returned triumphantly to Vitebsk as the Soviets' commissar for fine arts and director of the new Free Academy of Art, he took great care to show every respect to his teacher Yehuda Pen, who continued to paint and teach in Vitebsk for the rest of his life. Pen was

murdered in his home in Vitebsk in March 1937, a crime that has yet to be investigated properly.

Chagall left Russia for good in 1922 and eventually settled in France where he lived out his long and productive life bolstered by extensive international acclaim. *Chagall*, incidentally, is a "Frenchified" form of the common Jewish surname Segal, itself an acronym for Hebrew words meaning "assistant to the priest" which means, in effect, a Levite, the second of the three ancient "castes." In deep Lithuanian pronunciation, *s* and *sh* are frequently confounded or merged as a single sibilant. The stress on the final syllable is both more French-sounding and also in keeping with an old Jewish tradition that acronyms (whether personal names or not) deriving from three consonants get

a vowels and are stressed on the final syllable (for example, *Babád*, *Shabád*, and such common words as *tanákh* ‘Hebrew Bible’).

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Yehuda Pen's
("Divorce")



Belarusian Museum of Arts (Minsk)

Completed in 1917, Yehuda Pen's *Get* ("Divorce") depicts a Jewish divorce proceeding in a typical *bézdń-shútbl* ("rabbinical courthouse"), often a room in the rabbi's house. The rabbinical court comprises three judges (the three men seated at the left of the picture); the right-most member of the tribunal, seated at a separate table, is apparently the scribe who keeps a record of the proceedings. At this stage of the proceeding, the husband tells his side of the story while the wife, seated at right, listens unhappily (the reverse would happen when her turn comes). Relatives and others are huddled near the door listening, talking, negotiating. The men are listening just inside the door, the women just outside. . .

The rabbinical court is a misnagdic one. The picture on the wall (at right) is one of the traditional depictions of the Gaon of Vilna (rather than of Shneur-Zalmen, as would be the case in a Chabad setting). The scene seems to have been inspired by an event the artist witnessed in his native area north of Vilna rather than in the overwhelmingly Chabad-Lubavitch Vitebsk region. The portrait hanging to its left appears to be of Moses Montefiore (1784—1885), a famous leader of British Jewry, philanthropist and interceder on behalf of Jews worldwide in times of crisis. His

portrait began to hang in Jewish homes in the Pale of Settlement after his famous 1846 visit to Russia to persuade the czar to treat his Jewish subjects more humanely. He made many benefactions for projects to improve the plight of persecuted Jewries around the world and has remained a legendary figure. He lived to the age of 101.

Lissitzky (1890—1941) may be best known for his Soviet avant-garde work of later years, but his early Jewish work remains a vital historical component of the Vitebsk school and its artistic encapsulation of traditional Jewish culture. The major family festival of the Jewish calendar is the Passover *séyder* (seder), at which a number of songs are merrily sung by all the family. One of the most beloved is called *Khad gádyo*. Originally written in Yiddish around the fifteenth century, an Aramaic translation made it into the canonical *Hagadah* (Passover *séyder* book) in the sixteenth century. The song itself follows an internationally popular motif of A consuming B consuming C and so forth. It is a “counting up and down” song featuring a little goat which is mangled by a cat which, in turn, is done in by a dog, the dog by a stick, the stick by a fire, the fire by water, the water by an ox (who drinks it), the ox by the slaughterer, and the slaughterer by the Angel of Death and the Angel of Death by God. Each stanza starts one level higher and counts to the bottom, to the little goat, and to the refrain *Khad gádyo* (“one little goat [that my father bought for two zuzim]”). Whether or not accurate in the history of the song’s composition, its acquired symbolism as an allegory for Jewish history probably helped it get into the sacred prayer canon for the Passover holiday. The ancient kingdom of Israel was swallowed by the Assyrians, the Assyrians were swallowed by the Babylonians, the Babylonians by the Greeks, the Greeks by the Romans and so forth, while the little goat — the people of Israel — is somehow still around.

Lissitzky’s *V’óso náro* (“Then came a fire [that burnt the stick]”) is rich in elements of the Vitebsk school’s fantastic angular representations of the shtetl, with the two tablets to the left, in the “shtetl sector” of the painting, apparently representing the Ten Commandments ornament on the synagogue. The more complete Yiddish text wrapping the work from above reads *Iz gekúmen dos fáyer un farbrént dem shtekn* (“and then came the fire and burnt the stick”). The lettering at the bottom is the shorter Aramaic *V’óso náro* omitting the rest of the line (*v’sóraf l’khútro* “and burnt the stick”), in keeping with the tradition of elliptical verbal parlance, where the first words of a famed passage of quote “are enough” when speaking to others within the culture. Most often in such cases, a word or two of Hebrew or Aramaic would suffice for launching into a longer Yiddish translation or elucidation.



El Lissitzky's *V'óso náro* ("Then came a fire")

Solomon Yudovin (1892—1954) is sometimes considered the “link” between Jewish folklore studies and modern Jewish art. A native of Beshenkóvitsh (near Vitebsk), he was the official artist on An-sky’s 1912-1914 expedition (see p. 244), and his realistic drawings of everything from book designs to synagogue construction to tombstone inscriptions became the basis for incorporation of these elements (by him and others) into novel and imaginative artistic incarnations.



Yudovin's *Sabbath*

Yudovin's *Sabbath* portrays something of the atmosphere of those few moments leading up to sundown — onset of the Jewish *Shábes* — when the Sabbath candles are lit and the lady of the house makes the blessing on the candles while covering her face with her palms. In addition to the candles in the windows, the atmosphere is one of the Jewish woman who is empowered to bless the candles over the entire shtetl. The tailor's and bootmaker's shops are resting for Sabbath too, and the ever-present wandering beggar with his *tórbé* (beggar's sack), looking to “help” some Jewish family “earn” the good deed of welcoming a poor guest for *Shábes*.

The gentleman doing the writing in Chagall's *Literature* has the beard and cap of a traditional *sóyfer* (scribe who specializes in writing Torahs), and he appears to be writing in an opened scroll of the Torah. But he is not seated with the required formal decorum of the traditional scribe, and the two visible words he has written are in Yiddish, not Hebrew. They are *Amol iz*, the beginning formula of a Yiddish story (as in “Once upon a time there was. . .”). It is as if the painting is chronicling the transition from the old Hebraic scribal art to the new art of the Yiddish storyteller. The goat behind is bleating out the word: “Chagall” as if the artist is receiving his heavenly call, not from God or one of his prophets as in the Bible, but from one of His lowly creatures.

Humans and animals alike defying gravity and dancing over the village are, of course, classic Chagall. It is a theme inspired, it seems, by the popular versions of Chabad Kabbalah that were so widespread in eastern Lithuania. The flying horse



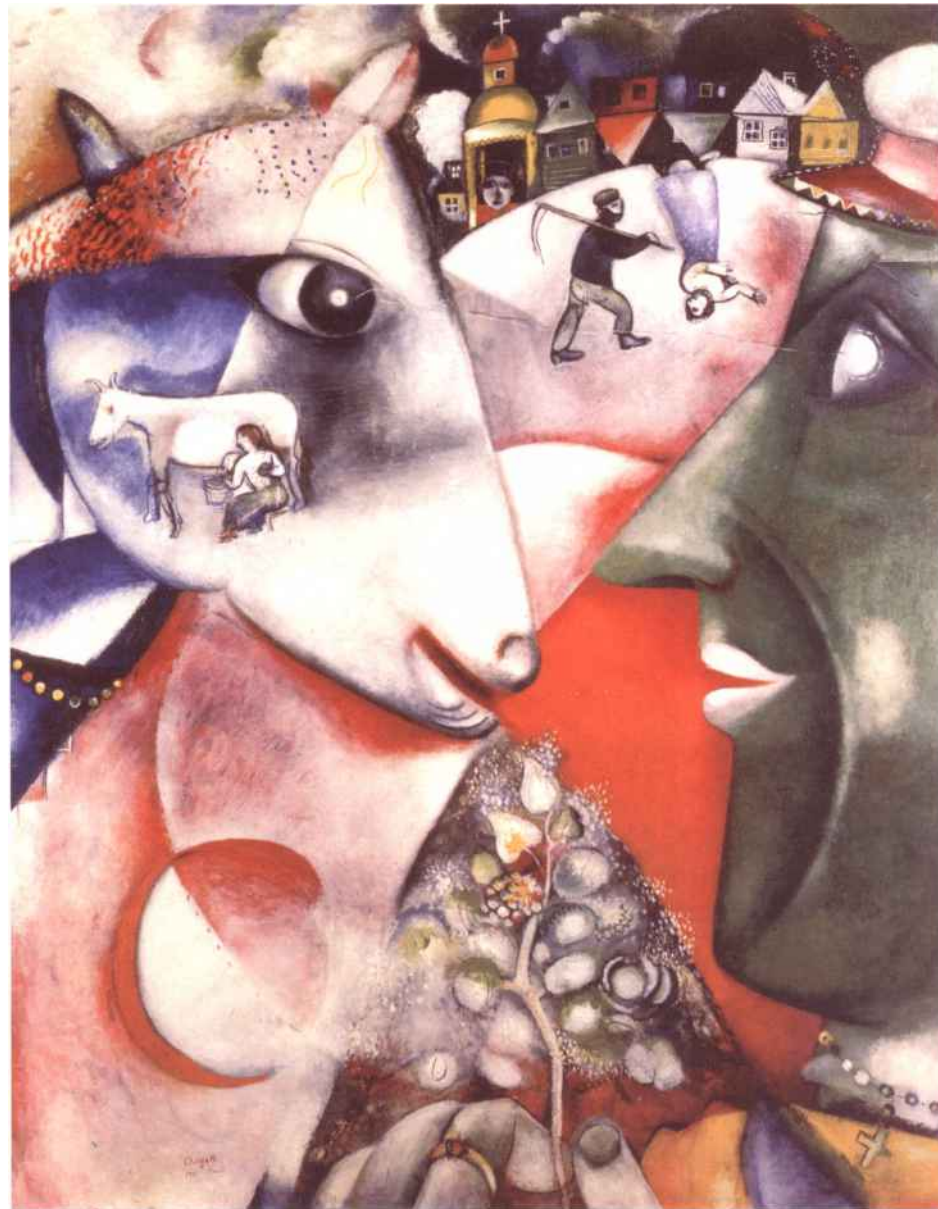
State Tretiakov Gallery (Moscow)

Chagall's *Literature* (1920)

holding a traditional candlestick, and the assertive purple-dressed woman holding a book, are characteristic of such imagery, as is the theme of the lovers on the ground whose imaginary word is that of the kabbalistic heavens. Indeed, love is a central motif in basic kabbalistic texts.

A profound analysis of Jewish sources and their use by Chagall is Benjamin Harshav's "Chagall: Postmodernism and Fictional Worlds in Painting" in the Guggenheim Museum's *Marc Chagall and the Jewish Theater* (N.Y. 1992).

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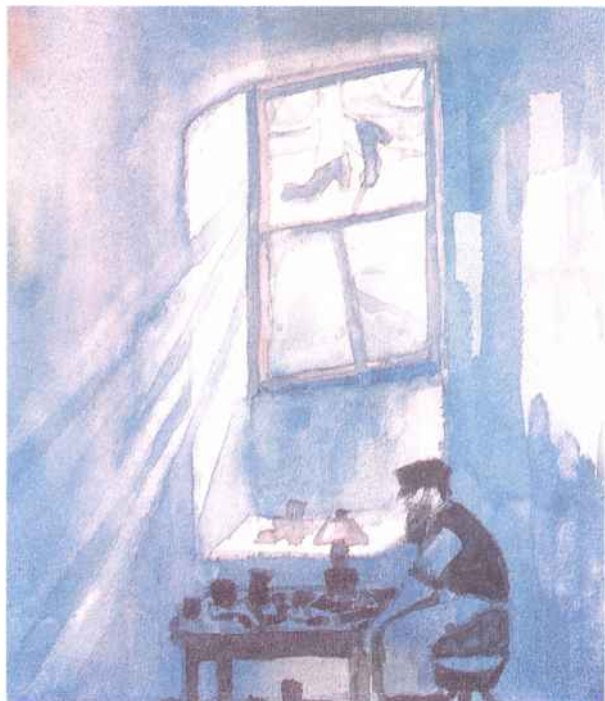


Museum of Modern Art (New York)

Chagall's *I and the Village* (1911-1912)

This March 1930 edition of the interwar period's leading Yiddish literary journal, Warsaw's *Literárishe bléter* (published by Boris Kletskin of Vilna), leads off with a 1924 photo of Chagall signed by him on top, in Yiddish: *Di Literárishe bléter mit líbe-grus, Mark Shagal, 1924* ("For *Literárishe bléter* with greetings of love, Marc Chagall, 1924"). The photo and greeting date from the year when the journal was founded by master Yiddish editor Nakhmen Mayzil (1887—1966), and represent the artist's wishes for the new (and then still daring) enterprise of a Yiddish literary weekly at an international standard. This 1930 issue has the headline "Marc Chagall's hundred new illustrations."

A major school of young artists flourished in Vilna during the interwar period. They are only now attracting scholarly and popular interest. One of the leading young talents was Benzion Mikhtom (1909—1941) who was active in the *Yung Vilne* ("Young Vilna") literary movement as well as in producing art for the famed *Máydím* Yiddish Puppet Theater on Konska Street (now Arkliu gatvé in Vilnius). He perished at Ponar, the mass killing site near Vilna. A number of his works have been discovered by and are housed at Lithuania's Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum.



Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum of Lithuania

Benzion Mikhtom's *Jewish Shoemaker in a Cellar*



Menke Katz Collection

Chagall's greetings to the accomplishments of Yiddish literature

Another major Vilna artist is Yonia Fain. Born in the Ukraine in 1913, he moved to Vilna in the early 1920s when his father was appointed to teach at Sofia Gurevich's secondary school (see p. 278). The art teacher at the school, A. Chastrau, an ethnic German from the Sudetenland who mastered Yiddish in Vilna, saw in the boy a great talent and inspired him. Fain studied in Vilna University's art department, and escaped the Holocaust via Shanghai. He celebrated his ninety-fifth birthday in New York in 2008.

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Yonia and Hellen Fain (Brooklyn, New York)

Yonia Fain's *The Four*

Horsemen of the Apocalypse

The heartland of Yiddish theater was in the southern, non-Litvak parts of East European Jewry, in the spirit of its founder, Avrom Goldfaden (1840—1908) of Staro-Konstantinov, Ukraine. In fact, by the twentieth century, the standard Yiddish of the theater was developing on the basis of Southeastern (“Ukrainian”) Yiddish while the literary language was standardized mostly on the Lithuanian model. Later, in the interwar period, the Moscow Yiddish theater made great contributions under its brilliant star, Solomon Mikhoels (1890—1948), who was murdered by Stalin’s henchmen.

The major Lithuanian Jewish contribution to Yiddish theater was the famed *Vilner trupe* (Vilna Troupe). Its origin is sometimes traced to the 1912 visit to Vilna of Jacob Ben-Ami (1890—1977), in which he put together an amateur theater group that went on to develop further. The Vilna troupe became famous for producing on stage serious works of modern Yiddish literature rather than the ad-hoc comedies that so delighted audiences in those years. Its greatest success, directed by Warsaw born David Herman (1876 — 1937), was An-sky’s *Dybbuk*, which became an instant classic.



Leyzer Ran Collection

A group of Jewish art students at Vilna University in the 1930s. During the Polish period, it was known as Stefan Batout University.



Leyzer Ran Collection

Jacob Ben-Ami (seated, center), visiting Vilna in 1912, puts together the amateur theater company that would evolve into the Vilna Troupe.



Leyzer Ran Collection

The Vilna Troupe in its backstage

Chapter 15

Today

The traditional territory of Jewish Lithuania is often considered to be, from the Jewish point of view, one vast graveyard, painful beyond words. There are hundreds of mass graves throughout modern Lithuania, Belarus and Latvia, where the Holocaust was in no small degree “tested” in the months immediately following the Nazi invasion of June 1941 (leading up to the January 1942 Wannsee Conference and *its* aftermath). The murder rate in Lithuania per se was the highest in all Europe, and today’s Republic of Lithuania is home to 202 known Holocaust mass murder sites (there are various additional “smaller” ones as well). Most of the actual shooting was done by enthusiastic local collaborators (who came from many walks of life) under Nazi German supervision. Later, during the Soviet period, Jewish historic sites were often destroyed or simply left to the ravages of the elements, as the remnant Jewish communities were subject to the repressive machinery of the Soviet system. They were simply unable to maintain much of their heritage. And, it is only natural that for survivors of the Holocaust, the genocide of greatest magnitude in human history, living out a peaceful and uncontroversial life, and creating new families, was accomplishment enough in many cases.

Rummaging “on site” for traces of the glorious Lithuanian Jewish past can be a rather haunting enterprise. In the years since the “loosening” and collapse of the Soviet Union, many mass graves have been properly marked with respectful multilingual monuments (often paid for by survivors from Israel or America). Still, many historically significant Jewish buildings are left unmarked, whether renovated for other purposes or not. Many old Jewish cemeteries in modern Belarus continue to be destroyed right now, as the stones are freely looted for ballast, building blocks and assorted other uses. The looting is often done “legally” by local government authorities. In modern Lithuania, by contrast, all known Jewish cemeteries were fenced in, marked and legally protected shortly after independence.







David Katz

The ruin that was once the great Valozhin yeshiva (see p. 147), now in Valozin, Belarus.

The former main synagogue of Dvinsk (now Daugavpils, Latvia) is an electrical goods store, with no mention of its erstwhile history.



David Katz

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One of the many patios in Brest, Belarus, made of Jewish gravestones. The inscriptions, some of them centuries-old, are face-up and fully readable.



David Katz



David Katz

Close-up of the patio.



David Katz

The Writing on the Wall: When Soviet-era plaster is scraped off during renovations, Yiddish and Polish store signs painted on the original brickwork are often visible (and usually painted over straight away). This street in Brest is now "17" of September Street" named for the date in 1939 when the Soviet army overran then Eastern Poland. Before the war the street was named *Peretz*, for the Polish Yiddish author Y. L. Peretz (1852—1915).



David Katz

A typical old Jewish cemetery
in present-day Belarus.



David Katz

And, thousands of historic old Jewish stones are simply
sinking into the ground. This one is in the old Jewish
cemetery in Hlozupit (now Aizpute, Latvia).

The small of survivors was subjected to a brutal system whose goal was to produce a homogeneous “homo Sovieticus.” It was a goal that in some measure succeeded, especially for those born after the war, or who were too young at its outbreak to have been fully acculturated in East European Jewish civilization. In the absence of schools and other institutions to promulgate the diverse varieties of Jewish culture, a colossal decline was inevitable. In recent decades, migration to Israel and the West, a low birthrate, and continuing assimilation (often: Russification) have all contributed to the ongoing decline of the Jewish minorities in Eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, the surviving elderly Litvaks in their lands are a hearty and resilient lot, many of whom are committed to *some* kind of survival of their heritage, be it the more general Jewish tradition or their own local, family or personal tradition. It often seems that the tragic past of these people — nearly all lost most of their families in the Holocaust — is now, in their waning years, transformed into a driving force for longevity and the need to preserve and to convey to others,

locals and visitors alike, as much as possible of the Jewish past. The breakdown of travel restrictions at the end of the Soviet period has enabled foreigners from around the world to encounter these survivors, opening up exciting new vistas for cultural interaction. American and Israeli rabbis have moved to cities with larger Jewish populations and set up religious communities. At Vilnius University, an intensive one-month summer course in Yiddish language and literature was established in 1998. Students from all parts of the world can “breathe in” the authentic language, culture and milieu of Lita.



David Katz

Avrom-Yankel Berchinfeld, the last prewar Jew of Radshkovitz (now Radshkovič, Belarus), prays three times a day. “You’re closer to God outside.”



David Katz

Arony-Yankev enjoys the daily company of his favorite goat. The juxtaposition of semi-rural shtetl life with the highly literate Hebrew-Aramaic-Yiddish tradition was typical of the prewar shtetl, but is exceedingly rare today.



David Katz

It is also rare to find a multigenerational Jewish family in a shtetl. There are three generations of Lipkoviches and Shatzmans in Oshmene (now Asmiana, Belarus). Grandmother Beylke Lipkovich is close to her granddaughter Dina.



David Katz

Shleyne Weinstein stands defiantly in the foyer of the main movie theater in Brest, which was the city's famous hexagonal synagogue before the war. The Soviets enclosed the old prayerhouse in a circular glass structure, which as it happens, has preserved the original exterior.



David Katz

Yankl Belkin, the last shtetl shoemaker in the former province of Vilna, in Głubok (now Hlybokap, Belarus).



David Katz

Jacob Bunka (Yankl Bunk) of Plungė (now Plungė, Lithuania), a famous wood-sculptor in the Lithuanian folk art tradition, turned his sights to Jewish thematics after the fall of the Soviet Union. His best known work is a huge wood sculpture of a young woman weeping, at the mass grave site where the town's teenaged Jewish girls were shot by local fascists in the opening days of the Holocaust in Lithuania.

Sokhem-Meyshé Adelson lives in an apartment carved out of his grandfather's prewar house in Suwalki (now Suwałki, Poland).



Pawel Figurski

Sonia Kitt, who lives in Dvinsk (now Daugavpils, Latvia), finds solace and happiness in knitting thousands of miniature aprons, and wearing a T-shirt with an image of her younger self.



David Katz



David Katz

Blanke Katz (1913—2006) in Švenčionys (now Švenčionys, Lithuania), was a living encyclopedia of knowledge about the town and about prewar Jewish Vilna. She wrote memoirs and letters late into the night and her modest apartment became the “last address” of Jewish culture in the region.



Dr. Shimon Alperovich



David Katz

From different generations: In a café in Kovna (Kaunas, Lithuania). Second from left is Shimon Davidovich, director of the Sugihara Center in Kaunas.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the rise of independent states in the region, numerous vibrant Jewish organizations, secular as well as religious, have arisen. The Jewish Community of Lithuania is proportionately one of the most active and productive. It is led by the redoubtable Dr. Shimon Alperovich, a descendant of the fabled Strashún family of Vilna (see pp. 188-189). His eightieth birthday was widely celebrated in 2008.



David Katz

Berl Glazer, one of the last deeply religious prewar Jews in Lithuania, at prayer in the main synagogue in Vilna



David Katz

Hersh Reles, over ninety, types away on his old Yiddish typewriter in Minsk. Reles (1913–2004) was the last prewar Yiddish writer on the territory of Jewish Lithuania

Dina Kharky, widow of the great Yiddish poet Izykhark (see p. 270), had set up a library in his name at the Jewish cultural center in Minsk. She used to enjoy a rest on this park bench on her way home each day



David Katz

Zalmen Yoffe who ran the synagogue in Riga, Latvia



David Katz



David Katz

Young Arkady Shulman edits the Russian Jewish magazine *Mishpukh* ("Family") in Vitebsk.



Rina Pušytė

Professor Meir Shub (far right) lecturing on Jewish history to packed classes at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University. He passed away in 2009.



Fern. Kahn

The Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York is heir to the Vilna Yivo (see pp. 284-289). Three generations among its staff in the early 21st century: David Rogoff (center), a Vilna born Yiddish editor and actor, is flanked by project archivist Vital Zajka (originally of Belarus) and Erica Blankstein-Kaplan, archivist for Yivo's iconographic collections.

While the various secular Lithuanian Jewish traditions survive microcosmically, among dedicated groups and at universities in a number of countries, the mainstream religious tradition, encompassing Judaism as a civilization, is thriving in genuine and growing communities internationally. As fate would have it, its strongest manifestations are the once-minority tradition of Lithuanian Hasidism (see pp. 127-137). The most powerful group are “the Lubavitcher” (Chabad). The name of that village, Lubavitch (now Liubavičy, Russia), where the second *rebbe* moved the dynasty from his father’s nearby Lyadi, resounds around the world as the name of a Jewish revival movement that boasts an international budget of around a billion dollars a year, taken together, and countless followers. Although the movement is much less consistently loyal to spoken Yiddish than southern (Polish, Hungarian, Ukrainian) Hasidic dynasties, Lithuanian Yiddish survives most perfectly among young people in Lubavitch circles today (even though for them, as for most orthodox traditionalists today, the word *Litvish* is usually synonymous with “Lithuanian Misnagdic”). History is, as ever, full of ironies.



Chabad Lubavitch

There are Lubavitch centers of all sizes and shapes flung far and wide internationally.



Chabad Lubavitch

The international Lubavitch headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, New York. It has sacred status among the movement’s adherents, and a perfect replica was built in Israel.



Yale Strom

Among the smaller Lithuanian Hasidic groupings, the best known is Karlin-Stolin. This is Yale Strom’s famous photo of pupils coming home on their school’s bus in Brooklyn (from his *The Hasidim of Brooklyn*, 1993, reproduced with



Rabbi Shalom Ber Krinsky, director of Chabad House in Vilnius, has for many years been the only resident rabbi in the city. Pictured with his wife, Rebbetzin Nechama Dina Krinsky.

The Misnagdic Lithuanian tradition survives most completely in the communities of the Lithuanian yeshivas. Most are in America or Israel, but there are some famous academies of the “Lithuanian type” (as they are often referred to in English) in other countries (for example, Gateshead in England). Many are known simply by the names of their original towns in Lithuania (which might be in any of the successor republics today) with the Yiddish adjective suffix *-er* added on, or with the word Hebrew *Yeshiva*s (“Yeshiva of —”) before the name



Yeshivas Brisk

Yeshiva Brisk in Cleveland (after Brisk, now Brest, Belarus)



Vital Zajtka

Mirrer Yeshiva in Brooklyn (after Mir, now in Belarus; see p. 147).



David Katz

Contacts with the ancestral homeland: Rabbi Samuel Jacob Feffer (of Bnei Brak, Israel, and Brooklyn, New York), one of the directors of the project to publish the complete extant works of the Gaon of Vilna, during a visit to Vilnius University.



Shoshana Balaban / Ponovez Yeshiva

Ponovezher Yeshiva in Bnei Brak, Israel (after Ponovezh, now Panevėžys, Lithuania).

The Karaites of Lithuania

To scholars around the world they are known as the Karaites of Lithuania, a group that evolved from a Judaic heritage that was gracefully synthesized with Arabic, Turkic and other cultures over a long and exciting history. The members of the group who still live in Lithuania insist on being called *Karaims* in English usage (the Hebrew plural *Kara'im* with the *-im* retained, but not functioning as a pluralizing suffix, hence the addition of the English pluralizing suffix *-s*). Moreover, they insist on not being identified as a Jewish group. The first rule of all study of societies is to let each society define itself rather than for scholars “who know better” to impose what they think. Indeed, from the genetic point of view, the Karaims have largely Turkic origins, and their language, Karaite (or Karaimic) is largely of Turkic origin and related to Tatar.

Karaism did start, though, with a renegade Jewish sect, and a long time ago at that. It was in the Babylonian period of Jewish history (see p. 26), in the eighth century AD, that a dispute developed over who would hold the office of Gaon, the formal post of the leader of Babylonian Jewry in those times. When Anan ben David, himself a serious rabbinic scholar, failed to get the post, he led a religious rebellion against the rabbinic authorities. The evolving philosophy of the sect based itself, like classical Judaism, on the Old Testament but without the “oral law” — the rabbinic commentaries and traditions that evolved over time and came to have sacred authority for Jewish communities (see p. 26). Karaism developed many of its own traditions and customs over the centuries, but it always sought to adhere to the literal meaning of the text. A classic case is the passage “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot” (Exodus 21: 24). The Jewish

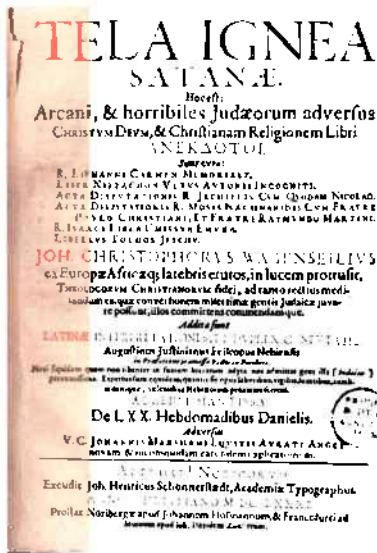
(Rabbanite) interpretation stipulates that the Torah means monetary compensation to the value of the severed limb. The Ananite (Karaites) interpretation leaves the text as it stands. Apparently under Islamic influence (Ramadan), Anan introduced a seventy day fast and practiced various forms of asceticism.

The Karaites survived and evolved over the centuries, with shifting centers for their culture, producing a long line of distinguished theologians and scholars who wrote in Hebrew and in Arabic. From Babylonia and Persia, Karaism spread to Egypt and North Africa and developed an important center in Jerusalem. The polemic literature featuring the Rabbanites vs. the Karaites invested Biblical scholarship, Hebrew lexicography and even the study of Jewish history with new verve and zest. The word Karaites is derived from the Hebrew word for “reading” or “Biblical text,” an indication of belief in the text itself.

By the end of the eleventh century, the center of Karaism (like that of Judaism) shifted to Europe, gaining a foothold in Spain and a much stronger base in the Byzantine Empire, where it underwent a new period of remarkable creativity and vitality, much of it conceptually parallel to contemporary Judaism. Aharon ben Eliyahu (Aaron ben Elijah) the Younger of Nicomedia (now Izmit, Turkey), compiled a systematic code of belief and religious practice in the early fourteenth century, called *Gan Eden* (“The Garden of Eden”). He has been called “the Karaite Maimonides” (cf. p. 34).

According to Karaimic tradition, the Lithuanian Grand Duke Witold (Vytautas) settled Karaimic families, who were among the Tatars he captured, in Troki (now Trakai, not far from Vilnius), as well as in Lutsk and Halicz. Other traditions have them coming as warriors to help the Grand Duchy fight off invaders. Still others posit their earlier arrival from the Crimea. The Lithuanian Karaims spoke (and in small numbers continue to speak) their Turkic language, Karaimic, in which they have created a rich folklore.

One of the most famous Lithuanian Karaimic authors was Isaac ben Abraham of Troki (±1533 — ±1594). His *Khízik emúno* (*Hízúq Emuná*, “Strengthening of Faith”) is a polemic defense of Judaism (Judaism in general as he saw it, vis-à-vis the various Christian denominations). This work was translated from Hebrew into Latin by the famous Christian scholar Johann Christoph Wagenseil, and published together with Wagenseil’s reply, in his *Tela ignea Satanae* (“The Fiery Darts of Satan,” Altdorf 1681). An edition for Jewish use appeared in Hebrew in Amsterdam in 1705, and a Yiddish version was published there in 1717. Voltaire referred to this book in

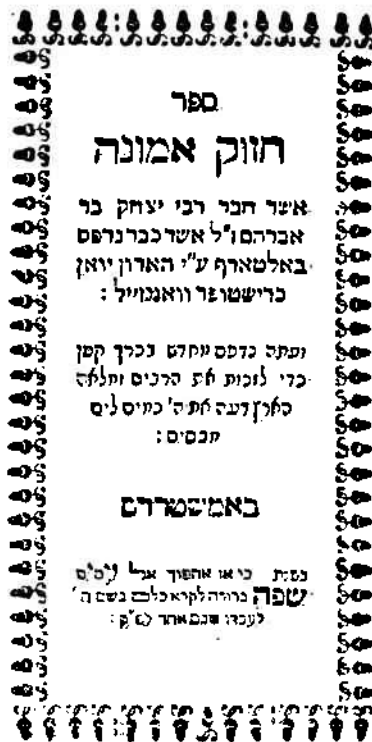


Rostock University Library

Christian scholar Wagenseil's 1681 edition of Isaac of Trani's book, polemically called *The Ten Parts of Satan*



Rostock University Library



Bodleian Library, Oxford

The Amsterdam 1705 "Jewish" edition of Isaac ben Abraham's *Kluzak Emuno*

The Yiddish translation of the Karaimic work of Isaac ben Abraham (Amsterdam 1717). The title page reads:

"The book *Strengthening of Faith*, compiled by the master of Torah, Prophets and Hagiographa [= the Old Testament] and equally master of the books of the wise men of the peoples of the world; the exalted, his honor the rabbi Rabbi Yitskhok ben Avrohom of blessed memory, which we have translated from the sacred tongue [=Hebrew] into Yiddish from the edition which is printed in Latin in Altdorf through Herr Christopher Wagenseil, and brought to the press for the benefit of all lovers of recognition of the unity of God and the true Jewish faith, and also, all doubtful passages therein are explained accurately to the great pleasure of the reader, and thereby helping to merit this world and the world to come."

glowing terms.

For many centuries the Karaimic community of Lithuania considered itself, and was considered, a community within Jewry, enjoying the same rights and suffering the same discriminations. There are numerous instances of cultural interchange, intermarriage, and cooperation (and sharing of rabbis and ritual slaughterers in various locations). That changed dramatically when the Russian Empire took over Lithuania and Poland in the late eighteenth century. In 1795, Catherine II exempted the Karaites from the double taxation to which both they and the Jews had been subject. In 1828, the Karaites were exempted from military service. The leading Karaimic scholar of the czarist period, Abraham Firkovich (1786—1874) devoted much of his life trying to disprove the Judaic roots of Karaism (in books written in fine Hebrew, claiming that Karaism alone represents direct continuity from the ancient Hebraic heritage). Although his scholarship remains controversial, his magnificent collection of Hebrew manuscripts, now in St. Petersburg, is most impressive.



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok

Abraham Firkovich

Prewar postcard featuring the Karaimic prayerhouse (*kemsa*) in Troki (now Trakai)



Tomasz Wisniewski Collection Bialystok



Karina Firkavičiūtė Collection (Vilnius)

Karaimic children with senior priest

Simon Firkovich (1897—1982) in Troki.

For many centuries and right up to the Second World War, the Karaimic community of Lithuania had a rich Hebraic tradition that went beyond the study of Bible, prayers and ancient texts to include the composition of new and original works, often in the spirit of religious polemics. They observed many of the same commandments and traditions as the local Jewish communities.

British scholar Israel Cohen (1879—1961) wrote the following memoir after his visit to Troki (then in Poland) shortly before the war:

“The Karaite synagogue, which was also situated in the principal street [of Troki], was a small structure of simple design which had replaced an earlier building. It was approached by a path leading from an iron gate, on either side of which were brick columns, on which was inscribed in Hebrew lettering and Arabic numerals the date of construction — 1894. Its cupola was originally surmounted by a ‘Shield of David,’ but the removal of this symbol was insisted upon by the religious head of the Karaites as smacking too much of orthodox Judaism. The offending symbol, however, still remained on the iron gate, from which it could hardly be removed without causing a conspicuous blemish.



Karina Firkavičiūtė Collection (Vilnius)

Celebrating the Feast of Harvest at the entrance to the prayerhouse (*knesset*) in Troki in 1936.

“My guide was the beadle of the local Jewish synagogue who was on friendly terms with his colleague of the Karaite conventicle, and he fetched him from his home to open the building for my inspection. The interior was in general like that of an orthodox synagogue with a gallery for women, except that there was no raised platform for the precentor, the latter having only a small reading desk on the floor. There was a Turkish carpet covering the gangway that led to the Ark of the Law at the upper end, but I was not allowed to walk more than a few feet, unless I was prepared to take my boots off, for the ground was considered sacred. [...]

“The Ark of the Law was draped with a red plush curtain: above it, and on one side, were the initial words of the Ten Commandments in gilt lettering, whilst on the other side were twin tablets with the complete text of the Commandments, all in Hebrew. [...] The Karaite prayerbook, printed in Vilna in 1863, differed radically from the orthodox Hebrew ritual; and the *tallis* or praying-shawl was likewise different from that worn in the ordinary synagogue, as it was more like a scarf and had, instead of fringes, a blue thread emerging from a cluster of white threads.

“In one important principle the Karaites had departed from the teaching of their founder, for they had light, even electric light, on the Sabbath. They defended this on the ground that the Biblical prohibition, “Ye shall kindle no light in your dwelling places” [] did not apply to their house of prayer, for this was not a dwelling place.

“The Karaites had a large cemetery. [...] Most of the tombstones that I saw were of the nineteenth century; many were of black marble, with epitaphs of gilt lettering in Hebrew or in Russian, and there were also several family vaults with black marble columns. A special sanctity seemed to cling to the place, for pious Karaites in Vilna always expressed a particular wish to be buried in its soil rather than in that of the great city.”

(Israel Cohen, *Travels in Jewry*, N.Y. 1953, pp. 155—157)

In 1999, Karaimic Studies, taught in the spirit of the surviving local community, were introduced at Vilnius University’s Center for Stateless Cultures by Dr. Karina Firkavičiūtė, an eminent musicologist and folklorist. Professor Stefan Schreiner of Tuebingen lectures on Karaite studies during his frequent visits to Vilnius.

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Dovid Katz was born in New York City in 1956. After completing his studies at Columbia University he settled in Britain where he founded and led Yiddish studies at Oxford University for eighteen years (1978-1996). After a stint at Yale, he resettled in Vilnius, Lithuania in 1999 to take up a new chair in Yiddish language, literature and culture at Vilnius University. Professor Katz is the author of dozens of studies in Yiddish language and culture, as well as three collections of fiction in Yiddish. He is a winner of a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Manger Prize and numerous other awards. For a decade and a half, he has led expeditions to seek out and record the last survivors in smaller towns in Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine and northern Poland. He is the son of Yiddish poet Menke Katz (1906-1991).

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