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The Mother City of Jewish Public Life: Zalmen Reyzen's Image of Interwar Vilna

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Annotation: A specific vision of Vilna as the model of an East European Jewish civil society crystallised in the years during and just after the First World War, and Vilna's professional elites and journalists played a critical role in the crafting and shaping of this idea. This paper shows how Zalmen Reyzen, a leading Vilna Yiddishist intellectual who edited Vilna's most important Yiddish daily between the wars, *Der tog* (1919–1939), tirelessly sought to convince others that Vilna had a special role to play as a model for the entire Jewish Diaspora, as a city uniquely suited to build a Jewish civil society based on a shared language, Yiddish. Reyzen told his readers in articles and editorials that the collapse of the tsarist regime gave Jews an unprecedented chance to build a new secular school system, create a new democratic communal board (*kehile*), and break the stranglehold of old communal elites.

Keywords: Vilna, East European Jewry, Zalmen Reyzen, *Der tog*.

Vilna on a Jewish map

The First World War was a catalyst that sparked far-reaching political and social changes, and East European Jewry was no exception. In his landmark essay 'The Paradoxical Politics of Marginality', Professor Jonathan Frankel noted the contrast between the suffering and upheaval caused by the war, and hopes that a new era had dawned, rife with possibilities for Jewish political renewal and cultural renaissance.¹

1 'Never before in modern history (especially since the expulsion from Spain) had the inherent vulnerability and weakness of the Jews as a scattered minority been exposed with such insistent brutality and impunity. Yet at the same time, many Jews, movements, groups and

In few places was this dynamic tension between upheaval and hope more noticeable than in Vilna, where Yiddishists and Diaspora nationalists saw Yerushalyim d'Lite, so important in the Jewish collective memory, as a lynchpin of a new vision of East European Jewish communal life. Even though the Jews in Eastern Europe lacked their own sovereign territory, they nonetheless had, to borrow Neil Jacob's term, 'geographicity', a Jewish map of perceived place that differed greatly from those of neighbouring peoples; few cities loomed larger on this Jewish map than Vilna.²

Jewish responses to these political disruptions and to the challenges of modernity were reflected not only in ideologies and the written word, but also in new notions of the role of key places, such as Vilna. The same communal and intellectual creativity that had made Vilna so prominent in the Jewish imagination before 1914, symbolised by the Vilna Gaon, the Haskala, and Jewish publishing and libraries, might now help inspire and bring together Polish Jewry that was very much a work in progress.³ Vilna might present, or so Reyzen, Weinreich and others hoped, a new self-reliant Jewish civil society in the Diaspora, where

individuals, came to the conclusion that the moment of emancipation had arrived. The Jewish people had it within their grasp to solve the Jewish Question.' Jonathan Frankel, 'The Paradoxical Politics of Marginality', *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. III, Oxford, 1987, p. 4.

- 2 In his history of the Yiddish language, Max Weinreich wrote: 'Even the geographic map of Jewishness is unique. Ashkenaz II is seemingly identical with Eastern Europe, but Vilna, thanks to the Gaon, the Maskilim of the nineteenth century, and the builders of Yiddish of the twentieth century, will have to figure on the map in larger letters than Vilnius, Viljn'ya, Wilno on a non-Jewish map. Lisa [in Polish, Leszno], Kotsk [Kock], Ger [Góra Kalwaria], Volozhin, Mir must be on every Jewish cultural-historical map; they are places too small to figure on a general map.' It is significant that for Weinreich, Jewish Vilna's greatest achievement in the 20th century is as a bastion of Yiddish. See Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, tr. by Shlomo Noble and Joshua A. Fishman, Chicago, 1980, p. 202. Quoted in Neil G. Jacobs, 'Introduction: A field of Jewish Geography', *Shofar*, Vol. 17, No 1, Special Issue: Studies in Jewish Geography (Fall 1998), p. 17.
- 3 Litvaks, Galician Jews, Volhynian Jews and the Jews of Congress Poland, communities with very different historical experience and cultural profiles, were now thrown together in a reborn Poland. The consciousness of belonging to a common entity, Polish Jewry, developed gradually in the interwar period, but it was not easy. Nachman Mayzel, the editor of *Literarische bleter*, noted in his postwar memoirs that 'getting these different tribes to come together and get along peacefully was far from an easy task. They were often not so willing to become part of the "Jewish melting pot"...' See Nakhman Meyzel, *Geven amol a lebn: dos yidishe kultur-lebn in Poyln tsvishn di beyde velt-milkhomes*, Buenos Aires, 1951, p. 17.

a common language, Yiddish, and a shared ethos of communal service, would counterbalance inevitable (and acceptable) political differences.

For Max Weinreich, the director of the YIVO, what interwar Vilna possessed more than any other city was what he called ‘the genius of place’.⁴ In 1937, Joseph Chernikhov declared that Vilna was Yavneh, the legendary yeshivah whose learning revived a Jewish world shattered by the destruction of the Second Temple. That same year, Zalmen Reyzen wrote that Vilna was the ‘Mother City of Jewish Communal Life’ (*Di muter shtot fun yidisher gezelshaftlekhkayt*).⁵ On 14 July 1942, Zelig Kalmanovich wrote in his Vilna ghetto diary that Vilna was the ‘Temple of Diaspora Jewishness’.⁶

One may well ask why they would make such claims, considering that one could just as easily have asserted that interwar Vilna was a provincial backwater: a poor city in a poor country, with only a fraction of the Jewish population of cities like Warsaw or Lodz, a centre neither of the Yiddish press nor Yiddish theatre.⁷ The answer to this question lies in the perception that what Vilna lacked in numbers or in wealth, she recouped in the unique circumstances of her

4 Ephim Yeshurin, *Vilne: a zambukh gevidmet der shtot Vilne*, New York, 1935, p. 323. This genius of place, Weinreich asserted, was why the YIVO was in Vilna, and not in wealthier cities like New York or Berlin. It was reflected in the interplay of urban space and memory, of regional identity, and a gorgeous natural setting, of Jewish pride in the Jerusalem of Lithuania, and a keen awareness of the other peoples who lived in Vilnius (the Lithuanians), Wilno (the Poles) and Vilnya (the Belarussians).

Genius of place, Weinreich implied, integrated past and present, encouraged the instrumentalisation of collective memory to create a new secular Jewish life based on deep respect for, rather than wholesale rejection of, the past, an implicit rejection of the Soviet model of Yiddish culture. A key case in point was the instrumentalisation of the memory of the Vilna Goen in order to legitimise Vilna’s unique ability to synthesise tradition and modernity.

5 *Vilner tog*, 13 November 1937.

6 Zelig Kalmanovich, ‘Togbukh fun Vilner Geto’, *Yivo-bleter*, Vol. 3, 1997, p. 76–77. By this time, Kalmanovich had largely renounced his previous support of secular Yiddish culture. ‘When God decided to destroy Jewish Vilna, perhaps he had a purpose, to hasten the redemption, warn those who can still be warned, tell them that there is no hope in the Diaspora. Jewish Vilna was a model, an example for a Jewish community with its own unique culture in the Diaspora. But many, too many did not see the dangers that lurked in this culture. And now the temple of Goles Yidishkayt is ruined, her temple is forever destroyed ... One didn’t need the present khurbn to predict the destruction of Vilna Jewry.’

7 For a book that rejects the view of Vilna as a centre of Yiddishism, see Susanne Marten-Finnis, *Vilna as a Center of the Modern Yiddish Press 1840–1928*, Berlin, 2004.

civic life. Indeed, it was her very poverty, various writers claimed, that made her civic achievements so much more significant.⁸

One might also cite yet another reason for such claims for Vilna's salience. Lithuanian Jewry, which before the war had been a two-million-strong united Jewish tribe within the Russian Empire, suddenly found itself split between the USSR, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Faced on the one hand with a new competing centre of Soviet Yiddish culture (Minsk), and on the other with a major Jewish centre marked by deep cultural and linguistic divides (Warsaw), Vilna emerged as a symbol of Litvak continuity, a special place which, by dint of its geographical position and its Jewish past, had a new mission to fulfil.⁹

To realise this vision of 'genius of place' required a major mobilisation of communal activists, drawn from the ranks of the city's doctors, lawyers, engineers, writers, journalists and local leaders. During the First World War and its aftermath, few of these activists were as dedicated to this new vision of Vilna as Zalmen Reyzen, who worked tirelessly to harness Vilna's 'genius of place' to wider national goals. Like many of the other '*klal-tuers*' (communal activists) who came to the fore at this time, Dr Tsemakh Szabad, Dr Yankev Vygodski and others, Reyzen was a 'Vilner' by choice not birth, a choice that underscored Vilna's reputation as 'the big city' in Jewish Lithuania (Lite), the city that brought together a critical mass of aspiring writers, doctors and lawyers, and turned them into a new Jewish intelligentsia.¹⁰

8 For a good study of the dialectical tension between poverty and cultural creativity in Vilna's image in the 19th century, see Shmuel Verses, 'Di shtot Vilne in shpigl fun der hebreisher haskole-literatur' in David E. Fishman (ed.), *Yivo-bleter*, New Series, Vol. II, p. 9–26. In 1930, Dr Tsemakh Szabad made the same point about interwar Vilna. See 'Vilne amol un haynt', *Der Vilner*, 1930.

9 For a superb discussion of 'Lite' (Jewish Lithuania) in the Jewish imagination, see Vladimir Levin and Darius Staliūnas, 'Lite on the Jewish mental maps', in Darius Staliūnas (ed.), *Spatial concepts of Lithuania in the long nineteenth century*, Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2016.

10 For a good discussion of Vilna as the 'big city' in the Litvak space and as a magnet for aspiring young men, see Mikhl Astour, 'Di yidish-veltkekhe Vilne', in: Moshe Khezkuni-Shtarkman (ed.), *Khesed l'Avrohom, Sefer ha-yovel le-Avrohom Golomb*, Los Angeles, 1969–1970, p. 319–333.

Zalmen Reyzen in Vilna's Jewish life

It was during the First World War that Zalmen Reyzen first attracted notice in Jewish Vilna. In his memoirs of Vilna, Hirsz Abramovich recalls his first impressions of Zalmen Reyzen.¹¹ It was late in 1915. Vilna had just been occupied by the Germans. The Russians were gone. The city's economy had collapsed, Jews were starving, and the city's political future was up in the air. Most of the established elites, bankers, leading merchants, even Vilna's most respected rabbi, Khaim Oyzer Grodzenski, had left the city with the retreating Russian army.¹² In this atmosphere of uncertainty, Zalmen Reyzen showed up at the meetings of the Russian-speaking Jewish intelligentsia that took place at the home of Leyb Kadison. Although Reyzen, the 28-year-old younger brother of the famed Yiddish writer Avrom Reyzen, had already written a Yiddish grammar, and, on the eve of the war, had compiled a lexicon of Yiddish writers, he was still a relative unknown.¹³ But he argued with fervour and passion that the Jewish intelligentsia had to abandon Russian and start speaking the language of the Jewish masses, Yiddish. Vilna's future no longer lay with Russia, and the Jews faced a well-organised, determined and chauvinistic Polish community, determined to control the city's future. Jews, Reyzen argued, had to present a common front behind a common language. Whoever determined Vilna's future, be they the Germans or the Allies, had to see the Jews as a people, as a nation, and not just as members of a religious group.¹⁴

11 Hirsz Abramowicz, *Farshvundene geshtaltn*, Buenos Aires, 1958, p. 172.

12 Yankev Vygodski, *In Shturm: zikhroynes fun di okupatsye-tsaytn*, Vilna, 1920, p. 17–18. Vygodski accused the previous communal leadership of 'abandoning' the community. Reyzen himself viewed the departure of the old elites in 1915 as a positive development, since it made it easier to establish a new kind of civil society in Vilna based on Yiddish. See 'Shteyt oyf der vakh', *Letste naves*, 1918, p. 209.

13 For an informative overview of Reyzen's life by someone who knew him well, see Dr Michael Astour, 'Zalmen Reyzen 1887–1941', *Oyfn shvel*, 1985, p. 260. His older sister Sore Reyzen would also achieve recognition as a Yiddish writer. Reyzen was born in Koidanov in 1888, attended kheder and a Russian school in Minsk, where he acquired a thorough knowledge of Russian literature, but unlike so many other Jewish students who attended such schools, he showed little interest in acculturation. Under the influence of his brother and Khaim Zhitlovsky's articles, he became an avid Yiddishist.

14 Much was at stake here. If the new German occupying authorities saw Vilna Jewry as a *konfessionsgemeinde*, a religious community, and not as a distinct national group, with the

National self-interest no longer permitted the spectacle of a people split between a Russian-speaking intelligentsia and a Yiddish-speaking mass. Jews had to show the German occupiers and all other parties that they were united, and not a hapless rabble passively allowing others to decide their fate. Influential figures like Dr Tsemakh Szabad, a Russian speaker, saw the logic of Reyzen's argument, and agreed that Jewish doctors and lawyers, the new leaders of the community who had replaced the old elites that fled in 1915, now had to give up Russian, at least in the public sphere, and switch to Yiddish. At the age of 50, for the first time in his life, Szabad began to write in Yiddish.

From that point on, and right up to 1939, when he would be arrested and later murdered by the Soviets, Reyzen was a major figure in Vilna's Jewish life. He wore many hats: as a fighter for the Yiddish school system; as a compiler of a new edition of the lexicon of Yiddish literature; as a patron and mentor of the writers group Yung Vilne; as an author of textbooks and anthologies; as a leader of the YIVO; and as an activist of the Democratic Party, Vilna's version of the Folkspartey.¹⁵ But perhaps his most important activity was his role as an editor: of newspapers like the wartime *Letste naves*, and then from 1919 to 1939 of Vilna's flagship Yiddish daily, *Vilner tog*, and also of ground-breaking historical anthologies and almanacs, such as the 1,000-plus-page 1922 'Chronicle of War and Occupation' (*Pinkes fun*

same legal standing in the city as the Poles, who made up almost half the population, then they might well leave the administration of relief activities and local education in Polish hands. With Vilna's economy in ruins, with an influx of destitute refugees, the new leadership that replaced the old elites not only had to feed the hungry, but also take advantage of the changed political situation to build new Jewish institutions, such as secular Jewish schools in Yiddish and Hebrew, a new Yiddish theatre, etc. Another issue was the rivalry between Poles and Lithuanians over the future of the city. During the German occupation, looking ahead, Vilna Jewish leaders believed that Jews had a vital interest in securing a 'seat at the table' when Vilna's future was discussed, and this bolstered the case for securing formal recognition as a national group. In this regard, see the important article by Marcos Silber, 'Ha-hanhaga ha-politit ha-yehudit be-Vilna v'ha-makhloket al demuta shel ha-medina ha-litait ha-mitgabeshet, 1915–1918', in: *Historia: ktav- et shel ha kheora ha-historit ha-yisraelit*, Vol. 33, 2014, p. 117–156. See also Samuel Kassow, 'Jewish Communal Politics in Transition', Deborah Dash Moore (ed.), in: *Yivo Annual*, 20, Chicago, 1991; Samuel Kassow, 'Zalmen Reyzen un zayn gezelshaftlekh-politische arbet, 1915–1922', in: David E. Fishman (ed.), *Yivo Bleter*, New Series, Vol. II, p. 67–99; Tsemakh Szabad, 'Iberzikht', in: *Vilner zambleter*, Vol. 2, 1918.

15 For a bibliography of Reyzen's numerous articles and publications, which is far from complete, see David Fishman, 'Bibliografye fun Zalmen Reyzen's verk', in: David E. Fishman (ed.), *Yivo Bleter*, New Series, Vol. II, p. 99–125.

di yorn fun milkhome un okupatsye). And above all, Reyzen was known as Mr Yiddish, in a city that was called the capital of Yiddishland. Looking back on her year in Vilna in 1938 and 1939, the late historian Lucy Dawidowicz recalled that Reyzen was ‘the most enthusiastic Yiddishist I ever met’.¹⁶

Zalmen Reyzen’s *Nusekh Vilne* (the Vilna Way) activities

In *Letste naves*, between 1916 and 1918, and then in *Tog*, from 1919 until 1939, Reyzen developed and honed his idea of what would become *Nusekh Vilne* (the Vilna Way). He did so in a way that underscored the important interplay of medium and message. As early as 1916, *Letste naves* featured a new Yiddish orthography and a new Yiddish syntax, purged of Germanisms.¹⁷

During these years, in *Letste naves* and then in *Tog*, Reyzen told his readers in articles and editorials that the collapse of the tsarist regime gave Jews an unprecedented chance to build a new secular school system, create a new democratic communal board (*kehile*), and break the stranglehold of old communal elites. The turmoil also presented a golden opportunity to modernise the Yiddish language, and fashion a new creative Jewish secular culture.

Indeed, Reyzen stressed in his editorials and articles, culture was at least as important as politics in this process of national renewal. Even as politics divided the Jewish community, which was entirely natural, culture could act as a counterweight, and help hold the community together.¹⁸ And in this regard as well, Yiddish would play a key role.

16 Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From that time and place: a memoir*, New York, London, 1989, p. 84.

17 Abramowicz, *Farshoundene geshtaltn*, p. 172–174; A. Y. Goldshmit, ‘Di yidishe prese in Vilne’, *Pinkes fun der historisher-etnografisher gezelschaft* (hereafter, *Pinkes*), Vilna, 1922, p. 583–590. On Reyzen’s lifelong crusade to improve and modernise Yiddish, see Dr Mordkhe Schaechter, ‘Zalmen Reyzen, der shprakhboyer’, in: *Oyfn shvel*, 1985, p. 260.

18 After the murder of Alef. Vayter (Aizik-Mayer Devenishki) in the Polish pogrom on 19 April 1919, Reyzen and Shmuel Niger, who was with Vayter when he was killed and narrowly escaped death himself, edited a memorial volume for Vayter, *Vayter-bukh*. In his article on Vayter’s life, Reyzen quoted extensively from Vayter’s introduction to the first issue of *Litvarishe Monatsheftn* in 1908, where he emphasised the key role that Jewish culture had to play as a counterweight to political divisiveness. See Zalmen Reyzen, Shmuel Niger (eds.), *Vayter-bukh: tsum ondenk fun A. Vayter*, Vilna, 1920, p. 57.

Pride of place in this vision went to the building of a new system of Yiddish secular education that included secondary schools as well as primary schools and kindergartens. In 1916, as conflicts between Hebraists and Yiddishists escalated within Vilna's key education committee, the Mefitsei Haskole, Reyzen joined Tsemakh Szabad and others in setting up the TBK (*Tsentrale bildungs komitet*) to organise a network of Yiddish schools.¹⁹ Right up until 1939, Reyzen would work tirelessly for these Yiddish schools, which he considered to be the community's greatest achievement. Breaking with Bund, Reyzen stressed that these Yiddish schools had to depend on the support of all sectors of the population, and not just the workers.²⁰ Indeed, throughout the interwar period, Yiddish education in Vilna, unlike in Warsaw and Lodz, could rely on the support of wide sectors of the community, rather than the narrow base of Bund and the left Labour Zionists.

In addition to schools, Reyzen envisioned a Yiddish culture that aimed big, that embraced theatre and music as well as literature and journalism, and that offered the best of world literature and theatre in Yiddish translation. If Jews failed to develop that linguistic loyalty and that cultural commitment, no promises of national rights, whether made by Germans, Poles, the Allies or anybody else, had any value.²¹

On the other hand, Yiddish high culture and quality Yiddish theatre, the Vilna Troupe, or S. Ansky's 'The Dybbuk', would convince non-Jews to rethink their negative stereotypes of Jews as parasitical hucksters, and begin to see them as rightful neighbours, and not harmful aliens.²² For example, Reyzen argued, the Vilna Troupe, which began performing in war-ravaged Vilna in 1916, played

19 Reyzl Valt, 'Der kamf in der khevre mefitsey haskole in Vilne 1915–1917', in: *Yivo Bleter*, 1937, p. 420–432; also Y. Rubin, 'Der yidisher tsentraler bildungs komitet in Vilne', in: *Pinkes*, p. 715–722.

20 Zalmen Reyzen, 'Di yidishe shul un di yidishe gezelschaft', in: *Di naye shul*, 1921, p. 5.

21 'The non-Jewish world will recognise our national rights only after we are ready to do so as well. As long as contempt for Yiddish permeates our internal discourse and public life, as long as Yiddish is not the obligatory language of business in our communal institutions, as long as the Jewish middle class fails to realise that a Jewish school system in Yiddish, yes, in Yiddish, is a matter of life and death for us Jews, then no amount of treaties and declarations issued by others will guarantee us our rights.' See Zalmen Reyzen, 'Inevynigste bafrayung', in: *Tog*, 1919, No 49.

22 Zalmen Reyzen, 'Der Dybbuk un di Yidish-Poylishe farshtendigung', in: *Tog*, 1921, No 6.

a major role in convincing the Germans that the Ostjuden were indeed a national group, and not an inchoate rabble.²³

This commitment to culture went hand in hand with Jewish pride and self-respect. In this regard, Lithuanian Jewry in general, and Vilna Jewry in particular, was particularly well suited, Reyzen believed, to serve as an example to Jews in other parts of Eastern Europe during a time of war, turmoil and dislocation. Assimilation had been much weaker in Vilna than in Congress Poland or Galicia, where large sectors of the Jewish intelligentsia had adopted Polish culture. To be sure, Reyzen admitted, the Vilna Jewish intelligentsia had indeed gravitated towards the Russian language and culture before the First World War. But since there were so few Russians in the region, this form of acculturation did not distance them as much from the Jewish masses as was the case in Congress Poland.²⁴

If Yiddish was to become a new pillar of the Jewish community, then it stood to reason, Reyzen declared, that the time had also come to build a Yiddish university. And where else could this be but in Vilna?

It was Vilna that first showed understanding and support for the cultural needs of a living Jewish people. It was Vilna that created a solid network of Jewish schools that exists nowhere else in the world. It was Vilna that was the first to have the courage to establish a modern national secondary school, without letting itself be intimidated by the assimilatory tendencies of the Jewish bourgeoisie. It was Vilna that organised pedagogical courses whose breadth and depth are unrivalled in the entire Jewish world. It was Vilna that bridged the chasm between the intelligentsia and the folk. In short Vilna is the centre of all the positive cultural accomplishments at the present time...and so right now Vilna is justified in claiming to be the spiritual leader of East European Jewry²⁵ [emphasis added by S. D. K].

23 Moshe Shalit and Tsemach Szabad (eds.), *Vilner zamlbukh*, Vol. II, Vilna, 1918, p. 165–173. Reyzen wrote that ‘The Vilne Troupe won respect not only from Jews but also from non-Jews, who had regarded us as a freakish object of curiosity. The Vilne Yiddish Theatre was a pleasant surprise. It demonstrated the maturity of our culture and highlighted the fact that we had a distinct national identity. We can say without any hesitation that the Vilna Troupe greatly raised our prestige in the eyes of the non-Jews.’

24 Zalmen Reyzen, ‘Litvishe un poylishe yidn’, *Letste naves*, 1918, No 9; ‘Avek mit der rus-sifikatsiye’, *Di vokh*, 1919, No 1.

25 Z. R. ‘A yidishe universitet in Vilne’, *Tog*, 1920, No 75.

Political agendas in Vilna after the First World War and the formation of Jewish civil society

When the Polish legions pushed out the Bolsheviks on 19 April 1919, they embarked on a bloody pogrom. Fifty-five Jews were killed, hundreds were injured, and Polish soldiers and civilians plundered Jewish property. One of the victims was the Yiddish writer A. Vayter, a blow that shocked the entire community, and especially Reyzen.²⁶ Accentuating Jewish anger at their Polish neighbours, the Polish mayor, Witold Abramowicz, who was known as a liberal and a decent man, denied in an interview with Reyzen a few days later that a pogrom had even happened!²⁷ During the entire interwar period, 19 April would stand out as a date that would symbolise the deep psychological chasm between Jews and Poles in the city. For Poles, this was a day of celebration; for a Jews, a reminder of the worst violence that the community had ever experienced in its centuries-long history.

After the pogrom, various fact-finding commissions arrived in Vilna, the Morgenthau Commission, the Samuels Commission, to investigate what happened.²⁸ In the pages of the newly formed *Vilner tog*, Reyzen contemptuously rejected Polish claims that Jews had attacked the Polish army. The Poles had better learn the difference, he warned with an eye on the Allies and the fact-finding commissions, between Lithuanian Jews and the Polish Jewish assimilationists that they had been used to dealing with. Lithuanian Jews were comfortable in their own skin, proud to be Jewish, and were determined to demand, and not beg for, their rights.

For a time, the Polish-Lithuanian dispute over Vilna, and Poland's fraught relationship with the Allies and the League, made Vilna Jews believe that they

26 See Khane Gordon-Mlotek, 'Der toyt fun A. Vayter un zayne nokhfolgn', David E. Fishman (ed.), *Yivo Bleter*, New Series, II, p. 43–65. After the armistice in November 1918, the city was briefly occupied by newly organised Polish forces, who were in turn driven out of the city by the Red Army in January 1919. The Poles returned in April of that year.

27 'A geshprekh mit H. Witold Abramowicz', *Tog*, 1919, No 21. Abramowicz insisted that what happened was no pogrom, but rather the inevitable violence and casualties sparked by intense house-to-house fighting between the Polish legions and the Bolsheviks, who, he insisted, were supported by many, too many, Jews. This became a common Polish explanation of these events.

28 A good contemporary account of the pogrom and the various investigating commissions is in S. Gordon, 'Di poylishe okupatsiye un di yidn', *Pinkes*, p. 279–325.

had some room to manoeuvre.²⁹ Reyzen urged the Jewish community to use this room to the full: if Reyzen had his druthers, Vilna would have ended up in a democratic Russia with all minorities guaranteed cultural autonomy. Second choice was to be part of Lithuania, a Lithuania which would be a *nationalitätenstaat* rather than a *nationsstaat*, a multi-national state rather than an ethnic nation-state, where Lithuanian, unlike Polish, culture would not be strong or attractive enough to tempt Jews with acculturation and assimilation. The last thing Reyzen wanted was for Vilna to become part of a Polish ethnic nation-state, which is what eventually happened.

In the process, Reyzen faced some bitter disappointments. He had dreamed of a strong *kehile*, a community council, democratically elected, by men and women, to create a new model of Jewish autonomy. Such a *kehile* would stand in a symbiotic relationship with a Yiddish revival: state support of Jewish autonomy would provide employment opportunities in municipal offices and schools, and lend an element of *takhles*, real tangible benefits, to Yiddish education.³⁰

Reyzen's hopes fell short. There were democratic elections in December 1918, when, for the first time in Jewish communal elections, women could vote. A short time after these elections took place, the Bolsheviks occupied Vilna, and the *kehile* suspended its activities, which only resumed when the Poles recaptured Vilna in April 1919.

Reyzen himself was elected on the ticket of the newly formed Democratic Party, a Vilna variant of the Folkspartey, based on Dubnovian principles of Jewish national autonomy in the Diaspora.³¹ It won only five delegates in the 80-member *kehile*, which was almost equally divided between a left-centre

29 On this, see Reyzen's introduction to *Pinkes*, Vol. IV, V.

30 'Di yidishe shul un di eltern', *Der tog*, 1919, No 77.

31 The Vilna Democratic Party grew directly out of Kultur Fareyn, which was founded in 1917, and in which Reyzen played a leading role. See B. Halperin, 'Der yidisher kultur fareyn in Vilne', *Pinkes*, p. 689–701. It is telling that although the Vilna Democratic Party included some of the most popular and respected pillars of the Jewish community, such as Dr Tsemakh Szabad, it never gained much electoral support. One might speculate that the very factors that made Folkists like Szabad and Reyzen so effective, a commitment to *doigkayt*, dedicated devotion to routine, daily communal work, also undercut their appeal at the ballot box. Bundists and Zionists of all stripes were also active in communal work, but at the same time they offered a stirring vision of Zion or of socialist revolution. Folkist pragmatism, whatever its virtues, lacked that romantic panache.

bloc that included Bund, the Folkists and Labour Zionists, and a right-centre bloc based on Zionists and the Agudah, with the Artisan Union in the middle holding the balance.

The *kehile* came to life again in April 1919. When it came to defending Jewish interests and presenting a united front to the Allies and the Poles, the *kehile* was a success.³² But the *kehile* quickly foundered on intractable intra-communal disputes over control of the Jewish school system. The left-centre bloc, including Reyzen, angrily rejected the Zionist takeover of the education department, and eventually left the *kehile* altogether. What Reyzen had long supported in theory, a strong *kehile* as a touchstone of Jewish autonomy in the Diaspora, he soon rejected in practice.

No one would have predicted the implosion of the *kehile* in 1919 and 1920, but what emerged next, one might say in a pragmatic ad-hoc fashion, was to be the template of Vilna's communal governance until 1939: a division of labour between the *kehile* on the one hand, and an extensive network of communal organisations and voluntary associations on the other. Jewish Vilna developed literally hundreds of such organisations: credit unions based in synagogues; associations of various professional groups ranging from physicians and lawyers to artisans and tailors; cultural societies and educational societies; sporting groups; *landkentenish*; and many more. Professor Arcadius Kahan, in a seminal article about his native city, referred to 'a hypertrophy of organisations', which came to include practically every member of the Jewish community. Vilna's many political parties existed in a symbiotic relationship with these organisations, imparting energy and enthusiasm.³³

32 On 5 May 1919, the *kehile* issued a defiant resolution that protested the pogrom, rejected all Polish charges of Jewish collaboration with the Bolsheviks, called for an international investigation of the pogrom, and demanded that the Poles respect Jewish national honour. It set up its own investigating commission, which gathered over 1,500 testimonies that were later made available to the Morgenthau and Samuel commissions. See *Barikht vegn der tetigkayt fun der Vilner yidisher kehile*, Vilna, 1920, p. 8–9. The *kehile* declared in its report that 'this resolution had great political significance. The Polish authorities recognised that in Vilna they were dealing with a Jewish community that was well organised and which possessed political and national consciousness, a community ready to fight, in all circumstances, for its rights ... this forced the Poles, despite the anger which it aroused, to treat the *kehile* with a certain degree of respect.'

33 Avrom Kahan, 'Vilne: a sotsyal-kultureler profil fun a yidisher kehille', in: David E. Fishman (ed.) *Yivo Bleter*, New Series, Vol. II, p. 33.

In short, what emerged was a largely self-sufficient Jewish community with a highly developed ‘civil society’, all in Yiddish. This is what Reyzen meant when he wrote in 1937 that Vilna was ‘the mother city of Jewish *gezeshaftekhkayt*’.³⁴ By this, he meant that Vilna represented a vision larger than the city itself: the vision of a community that embodied the possibility of a creative national existence in the Diaspora: a community that could counterbalance political conflict with civic responsibility, neutralise the threat of assimilation with a united commitment to a Jewish language, and fund and support an entire network of social institutions that embodied a deep-rooted sense of national responsibility. One might also say that Vilna was the right size: a city, not a shtetl, but much smaller than a metropolis like Warsaw or Lodz. There were enough Jews to build a civic culture, but not so many that they were strangers to each other. And, as Cahan observed, there was much less social distance between various sectors of the community in Vilna than in any other major Jewish city.

This notion of *gezeshaftekhkayt* was broad enough to recognise that Jewish Vilna was not homogenous. There was the religious Vilna of Rabbi Khaim Oyzer Grodzenski, the *mizrakhi* (religious Zionist) Vilna of Rabbi Yitshak Rubenstein, the Zionist Vilna of Dr Yankev Vygodski, and of the Tarbut (Hebrew language) gymnasium, whose graduates included later resistance heroes such as Yitzhak Zuckerman and Abba Kovner.

At the same time, what they all shared was a common language, Yiddish. Reyzen’s claim that Vilna was the centre of Jewish *gezeshaftekhkayt* went hand in hand with his belief that interwar Vilna was the unofficial capital of Yiddishland, the seat of the YIVO, the city where Moyshe Kulbak wrote that: ‘*Yidish iz der proster krants fun dembn-bleter, oyf di arayngangen di heylik-vokhike fun shtot*’ (Yiddish is the homely crown of oak leaves, over the gates, sacred and profane into the city). For Kulbak, Vilna was now defined by its Yiddish speech; the city itself transformed what had been profane and routine into something higher and better. By the same token, this determination to valorise the Jewish everyday, the weekday Jew alongside the Sabbath Jew, largely informed the mission and ethos of the YIVO.³⁵

34 *Vilner tog*, 13 November 1937.

35 For a good discussion of this by the director of the YIVO, see Max Weinreich, ‘Derkenen dem haynt’, *Yivo Bleter*, 1931, No 1.

One way Reyzen chose to better define the perception of Jewish Vilna, its place in Jewish geography, was to contrast it with Warsaw. For Reyzen, Vilna's virtues were highlighted by Warsaw's faults.³⁶ Vilna, with a fraction of Warsaw's Jewish population, achieved far more in the civic sphere. There was more national pride, more self-respect. The social and cultural differences that made Warsaw Jewry a mosaic of different Jewish worlds, Polish speakers, Hasidim, migrant Litvaks, were tempered in Vilna with more social solidarity and cultural homogeneity.³⁷ As early as 1918, and continuing throughout the interwar period, Reyzen underscored that while Warsaw had more Jews, its Jewish community lacked that core of dedicated *klal-tuer* (public activists) ready to do the hard work of community building. Reyzen underscored the ongoing collaboration between ordinary Jews and Vilna's Yiddish-speaking professional elites, who still incorporated much of the populist ethos of the old Russian intelligentsia.

This professional elite included dozens of very impressive individuals. There were scientists and educators, such as Yosef Yashunsky, and engineers, such as Avrom Klebanov and Mates Shrayber. Women played an important role: one example is Vita Levin, who ran a model school for mentally challenged children; and teachers such as Mira Berstein, to whom Abraham Sutzkever dedicated a poem in the Vilna Ghetto. Especially important in providing communal leadership was Vilna's corps of Jewish physicians. Dr Tsemakh Szabad was the first chairman of the democratic *kehile* (Jewish community council), the editor of *Folksgezunt* and *Vilner Zamlbikher*, and a leader of the Vilna Folkspartey. Dr Gershon Gershuni was one of the founders of *Hilf durkh arbet*. Dr Herts Kovarski built up the *Kinder-farzorgung*. Dr Eliyahu Globus led the major Jewish sports

36 *Vilner Tog*, 1920, No 116. 'Where is any sign on consistent, ongoing systematic activity on the part of the Jewish intelligentsia in Warsaw? One should be ashamed of the fact that during this historical era that we are all experiencing, Warsaw failed to produce any literary publication that rose above the level of the daily press. Warsaw, with its large number of journalists and writers, made not the slightest attempt to achieve what we achieved here in Vilna ...'

37 Reyzen was far from the only writer to compare the two cities. In a 1926 article in *Literarische bleter*, Y. Y. Singer made a strident defence of Vilna's virtues at Warsaw's expense. Both Vilna and Warsaw, Singer asserted, had spent a century under Russian rule. But Jewish Vilna had taken the best of what Russian culture had to offer: idealism, and a determination to work for the good of the community. Jewish Warsaw, on the other hand, had taken the worst: philistine *poshlost'*, selfishness, materialism and corruption. Vilna, not Warsaw, Singer concluded, was the world centre of Yiddish culture. See Y. Y. Singer, 'Vilne', *Literarische bleter*, 1926, 19 February, No 94, p. 125.

club, the Vilna Maccabee. And, of course, Dr Yankev Vygodsky emerged as one of Vilna Jewry's most important leaders.³⁸

Bringing together the traditions of the old Russian intelligentsia and Lithuanian Jewry, these professionals created a culture of community service, of social responsibility, and personal accountability. In Russian, there is a term '*filosofia malykh del*', the philosophy of small deeds. For a few radical Russian revolutionaries like Lenin, this term came to have a pejorative meaning. Why build a co-op, a school or a clinic, when you can aim for a revolution? In Vilna, there were certainly Jewish revolutionaries. But no one scoffed at 'small deeds'. It was the very life of the community. The ORT, the Vilna Technikum, the Realgymnasium, and 150 other organisations, owed their vitality to the hard work of engineers, doctors, lawyers, artisans, and many ordinary Jews.

One specific example Reyzen cited of the difference between Vilna and Warsaw was Vilna's new historiography, in which Reyzen played a key role: *Vilner zamlbikher* of 1916 and 1918, the 1922 *Pinkes*, and many other books right up to 1939, including *Shul-pinkes* of 1924, the enormous chronicle of the EKOPO, published in 1930, Yeshurin's *Vilna* published in 1936, Zalmen Szyk's *Vilna*, an amazing guidebook, whose first volume appeared in 1939.

Just to list these volumes reminds us that Vilna was doing something that no other Jewish community in the world was attempting to do: to rethink the very idea of community history, to write about itself in real time, and to expand the scope of the traditional chronicle (*pinkes*) to encompass a new Jewish reality.

This new Vilna Jewish historiography was a collective effort that brought together political rivals. Following in the footsteps of Simon Dubnov, S. Ansky and Y. L. Peretz, these texts epitomised the political and cultural urgency of *zamlng*, of documenting Jewish life in all its variety. Including a vast array of subjects, these thousands of pages were a kind of vast '*kol bo*', a capacious almanac, whose implicit message was that the new Jewish world aborning in Vilna, the schools, sports clubs and libraries, was too diverse, too much a work in progress, to fit into the procrustean bed of narrow ideology. Ideologies, parties by all means; they imparted hope and the determination to face obstacles; but they

38 On Vilna Jewish professionals and professional organisations, see the several articles that appeared in A.Y. Grodzensky (ed.), *Vilner Almanakh*, Vilna, 1939. Also, Tsemakh Szabad, 'Di yidishe doktoyrin in Vilne onheybndig fun der tsveyter helft fun 19tn yorhundert', in: Yefim Yeshurin (ed.), *Vilne: A zamlbukh gevidmet der shtot*, Vilne, New York, 1935, p. 725–736.

were only one side of the coin; the other being a civil society of organisations where rivals could work together.

A key aspect of that model was the assertion that of all Jewish communities, Vilna was best positioned to serve as a model for how to synthesise Jewish tradition with modernity. With the exception of Khaykl Lunski's *Fun vilner geto*³⁹, which mourned the decline of the old, traditional, religious Vilna, this new historiography highlighted Vilna's central role in the Jewish world. It was forward looking and optimistic. We are building something new, which will serve as a model for the entire Jewish world, Reyzen emphasised in his introduction to the 1922 *Pinkes*.⁴⁰

Conclusions

What Vilna managed to build is not just of local significance. It is important for all world Jewry. If, God forbid, these achievements that were won thanks to such hard efforts are swept away, it will be a terrible loss for all Jews.⁴¹

It is easy today to sigh over Reyzen's *naïveté*. His hopes for Yiddish did not work out. Politically, his democratic populism (*Folkism*) turned out to be a dead end. He was a democratic leftist, sceptical of Bund and of the communists, but willing to work with them for a common Yiddish cause. Over time, there is much evidence to suggest that his political views moved steadily leftward.⁴² But in the end, he was brutally murdered, not by the Nazis, but by the Soviets, in 1941.

39 Khaykl Lunski, *Fun vilner geto: geshtaltn un bilder*, Vilna, 1920.

40 'Hakdome', *Pinkes*, Vol. V.

41 Ibid.

42 Dawidowicz wrote that Reyzen was known to be a Trotskyite, but the evidence for this is thin. In 1918–1920, he condemned the Bolsheviks for their terror and dictatorship, even as he welcomed their support of Yiddish culture. By the same token, he rejected Bund's narrow class-based ideology, while also recognising that Yiddish culture needed the help of the Jewish labour movement. Over time, Reyzen did change. In a 1937 article in *Tog*, he noted that many Yiddishist intellectuals had left the Folkists to join Bund, because the Folkists had become a pale version of their former selves, while Bund was the most active force fighting for Yiddish culture. Astur recalls that Reyzen became quite pro-Soviet, but had to tread carefully as editor of *Tog*, because of Polish censorship. Nonetheless, he bitterly condemned the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, and this may have been the direct cause of his arrest in September 1939.

If we look at the history of prewar Polish Jewry just through the prism of the Holocaust, we see a community of millions hopelessly trapped, on the brink of disaster. Book titles such as Celia Stopnicka Heller's 'On the Edge of Destruction', or Jacob Leshchinsky's *Oyfn rand fun opgrunt*, speak for themselves. But doing good history is about trying to understand a period in its own terms, with a minimum of back shadowing.

If people like Max Weinreich and Zalmen Reyzen did not succumb to despair, that too is a stance that deserves serious study. Lucy Dawidowicz, who was herself quite pessimistic about the future of Polish Jewry, recalls that in 1939, Max Weinreich was full of optimism, and was going ahead with plans for the YIVO conference in 1940. At a regional medical conference that took place in Vilna in 1939, a Jewish doctor urged Jewish women to have more babies 'Oyf tselokhes undzere sonim' (to spite our enemies). At one Yiddish school in Vilna, just one week before the start of the academic year, the Polish authorities suddenly confiscated all the furniture. Working day and night, Jewish parents cobbled together enough tables and desks to enable classes to begin.

Increasingly threatened, with mass emigration no option, what other choice did prewar Polish Jewry have, but to fall back on its inner resources of moral resistance and defiance? And here the image of Vilna, crafted by Reyzen and others, became especially important. Just before the war, a new song became popular: *Vilne shtot fun gayst un tmimes*. It was a song that fixed the image of Vilna as a special city whose unique past was especially suited to inspire Jews to meet the challenges of the dark present.

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Svarbiausias miestas žydų viešajame gyvenime: Zalmeno Reizeno tarpukario Vilnos vaizdinys

Santrauka

Vilna tarpukariu anaipol nebuvo ekonomiškai klestintis miestas ir kituose miestuose, kaip antai Varšuvoje ar Niujorke, gyveno gerokai daugiau žydų, ten veikė spaudos ir teatrų jidiš kalba centrai. Vis dėlto daug iškilų žydų veikėjų, ypač jidišistų, kaip tik Vilną laikė nekarūnuota įsivaizduojamos tarptautinės valstybės, vadintos *Jidišlandu*, sostine ir net, pasak Zeligo Kalmanovičiaus, „žydų diasporos šventykla“. YIVO direktorius Maxas Weirichas aukštino Vilnos *genius loci* (vietos dvasią). Nepaisant ekonominių sunkumų, Vilna siejosi su už patį miestą didesne vizija; tai buvo vizija žydų bendruomenės, įkūnijančios kūrybingo tautinio gyvavimo diasporoje galimybę – gebančios politinį konfliktą atsverti pilietine atsakomybe, įveikti asimiliacijos grėsmę visuotinai puoselėjant žydų kalbą, galinčios sukurti ir išlaikyti socialinių institucijų tinklą, pagrįstą stipriu tautinės atsakomybės jausmu.

Vilna ilgą laiką buvo laikoma Rytų Europos žydų kultūrinės lyderystės centru. Vis dėlto ši savita Vilnos, kaip žydų pilietinės visuomenės modelio, vizija iki galo išsikristalizavo per Pirmąjį pasaulinį karą ir iškart po jo. Kuriant ir formuojant šią idėją svarbų vaidmenį atliko geriausi profesinio Vilnos elito atstovai ir žurnalistai žydai.

Pagrindinė šio projekto įgyvendinimo figūra – Zalmenas Reizenas, iškilus Vilnos jidišistų intelektualas, tarpukariu leisto svarbiausio Vilnos dienraščio *Der tog* („Diena“) redaktorius. Straipsnyje pasakojama, kaip neuilstamai Reizenas stengėsi įtikinti visą žydų diasporą, kad Vilna turi tapti pavyzdžiu miesto, tinkamo kurti žydų pilietinę visuomenę, vienijamą bendros jidiš kalbos.

Raktažodžiai: Vilna, Rytų Europos žydai, Zalmen Reizen, *Der tog*.