

THE TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE CULTURE OF READING AMONG LITHUANIAN JEWS IN THE 2ND HALF OF THE 19TH C. – 1ST HALF OF THE 20TH C.

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The article is dealing with the changes in the culture of reading within the Jewish community of Vilnius and Lithuania during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. It analyzes the transformation of the readers' audience with regard to gender and age, the supply of reading materials and the means of their distribution. There were several periods of critical importance for those changes: the third decade of the 19th century when Lithuania became a center of Jewish Enlightenment – Haskalah movement in Russian Empire, and the inter-war period when the community underwent yet more radical modernization. The article presents the processes and the phenomena of the transformation and concludes with a notion of the extreme versatility in readers' tastes and needs, as well as in the means of satisfying them, that the community reached on the eve of its annihilation during the Nazi occupation.

KEYWORDS: *Lithuanian Jews, reading, Jewish libraries.*

The goal of the article is to examine the dynamics of the culture of reading within Lithuanian Jewish community during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. The notion of Lithuania's Jewish community, including Vilnius, that is used as the main working concept in this article could seem controversial, given the fact that for long periods Vilnius region was separated from the rest of the country. However, this notion proved to be more stable than the geopolitical changes of the 19th–20th centuries. Indeed, for the most part of its history the Jewish community of Lithuania was if not culturally monolithic or uniform, at least preserving common cultural tendencies, especially in the pre-modern period. The object of this article is high and popular intellectual culture as represented in the choices and possibilities of reading among the subgroups and individual members of the community.

Similarly to other regions of Eastern Europe, in Lithuania the Jewish society mode of using books went along with the paradigm of religious education, and so reading was a prestigious endeavor as well as the means of serving pious goals. One of the striking features of the reading audience of the pre-modern period was its strict gender division: men read in Hebrew that had a high status of the 'holy language', and women – in vernacular Yiddish. Or rather, men 'studied', and women just 'read'. A reading/studying man was a paragon of virtue whom the community put on the top of its social hierarchy; whereas a woman reading her Yiddish prayer-book or Yiddish translation of the Bible was conceived as satisfying her private interests and as good as invisible in the system of community values. In this mode, there was no official place for recreational reading, and accordingly, virtually no supply of such kind of texts. Although, as some researchers state¹, it was actually women who enjoyed the reading as an enriching and, at the same time, entertaining experience, because their reading was detached from the obligation of publicly demonstrating its results that men had, and, consequently, of a fear to fail in public opinion because of insufficient level of knowledge drawn from the religious literature obligatory for men.

However, men undoubtedly cherished the intellectual appeal of reading. The study of Talmud was especially mind-provoking, and law codices and treatises that constructed a constant element of daily study also demanded sharp mental abilities. Able teenagers and young men studied in religious academies – yeshivas that supplied them by study material². The adults who wanted to continue their learning gathered after the work and the services in the synagogues and prayer houses that functioned also as study halls and public libraries³: firstly, the Talmud and other rabbinical works were too expensive for many to have at home, and secondly, in the synagogue one could read and discuss in a group, thus gaining additional insights and deeper understanding. Women's books, however, constituted their private possession and were read whenever time and circumstances allowed for that.

The first dramatic change in that centuries-proven structure came to pass in the third decade of the 19th century when the waves of Jewish Enlightenment – Haskalah that evolved in Western Europe from the end of the 18th century reached Lithuania. Shortly afterwards Lithuania became a center of European Haskalah, because the local adepts of the movement not only joined in developing new genres of Jewish literature that were first presented to the Jewish reader by German, Austrian and Bohemian enlighteners, such as philosophy, philology, modern Bible commentary and natural sciences; not only established their own periodical press; but created modern secular Jewish prose and poetry – no small achievement. The language of Haskalah was Hebrew, and in that sense this modern culture mirrored

the traditional one, with its concept of ‘the holy language’ and virtual exclusion of women from the reading public. That was one of the reasons that the new texts produced by Lithuania’s Haskalah writers spread among different layers of Jewish society, not only its “progressive” wing. Especially popular were Avraham Mapu’s of Kaunas novels “The Love in Sion” and “The Guilt of Samaria” that were even clandestinely read by yeshiva students⁴.

But in Lithuania there was a change in the perception of projected readers’ audience, when one of Haskalah writers, Isaak Meyer Dik, came up with the idea of short stories in Yiddish that used elements of romance, adventure and humor for promoting the ideas of cultural modernization. These immensely popular booklets with names like *A Horrific Story of Turkey*, *The Revenge* or *The Everlasting Love* were ostentatiously addressed to women but were known to be read by men, even if they were reluctant to admit it. (Thus, the Jewish writer and journalist Samuel Leib Zitron only acknowledged the fact of reading Dik when studying in elementary Jewish school in his memoirs: “With me it was already like a rule: every Friday at midday, returning from *heder*, to go to Yudl the travelling book-seller and to take from him for a kopeck rental fee a story of Dik’s... If it happened once in a while on a Friday that Dik’s stories had been snatched up by other earlier readers... the whole joy of the Sabbath was marred”⁵. Dik was also instrumental in developing Yiddish as a legitimate language of culture and projecting a place among Jewish readers for those who were not among the most prominent representatives of rabbinical scholarship.

Among many textual activities of Lithuania’s Jewish enlighteners some of the authors specifically took upon themselves a mission of presenting, in their translated form, new texts: either belonging to the Jewish sphere but unknown locally (e.g. Shlomo Mandelkern’s translation of “Ezra the Scribe” by Ludwig Philipsohn⁶),

1 See e. g.: PARUCH, I. *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteen-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*. Hanover; London, 2004; STAMPFER, Sh. *Gender Differentiation and the Education of Jewish Women. In Families, Rabbis and Education*. Oxford; Portland, 2010, p. 169–189.

2 Thus, with the establishment of the Volozhin yeshiva that became renowned for its high level and ambitious programs, several new full editions of the Talmud were printed by Slavuta’s Shapiro typography in order to cater to its students’ needs.

3 See e.g.: HUNDERT, G.D. *The Library of the Study Hall in Volozhin*. In *The Gaon of Vilnius and*

the Annals of Jewish Culture. Ed. by I. Lempertas. Vilnius, 1998, p. 247–256.

4 See: НОСОНОВСКИЙ, М. Авраам Мапу на Западе и на Востоке: между Библией и вольнодумством. In *Разделяющий святое и будничное: иврит, идиш, светское и религиозное в традиционной еврейской культуре*. Нью-Йорк, 2005, p. 253–270.

5 TSITRON, S. L. *Dray literarische doyyres* [Yid. Three Literary Generations], vol. I. Quoted from: ZINBERG, I. *A History of Jewish Literature*, vol. 7: *Old Yiddish Literature from Its Beginnings to the Haskalah Period*. New York, 1975, p. 90.

6 *Ezra hasofer*. Vilna: Sh. Y. Fin and A. Ts. Rozenkrants, 1866.

or from non-Jewish domain entirely: for instance, Kalman Shulman's translation of Eugène Sue's "Les Mystères de Paris"⁷, Georg Weber's "Allgemeine Weltgeschichte"⁸, and translation-based compilations from various sources on biblical and general history and geography⁹. Being mostly autodidact, Jewish literates hardly knew such classic languages as Greek and Latin (thus, the first Hebrew adaptation of Virgil's "Aeneid" was made by a young poet Mikha Joseph Levenson through a medium of Schiller's German translation¹⁰). But they had competence in German, French, Russian and Polish, and with time literature in more languages came to the fore as material for translation.

Another novelty in the culture of reading brought to the Jewish community of Lithuania by the enlighteners was the development of Jewish periodical press, specifically – literary magazines. A special place in this context merits the editor and publisher Samuel Joseph Fin who was a harbinger of Hebrew periodical press in Russian empire, first as an editor of "Northern Flowers"¹¹ and later – of much more successful weekly (from 1871 – a monthly) "Carmel Mountain"¹².

And so, the Lithuanian Jewish enlighteners enriched the reading horizon of Jewish public in manifold ways: in content – by their original work and by texts presented by them in translations, as well as in methods of disseminating them through the medium of periodicals that created a much broader contingent of readers.

Lithuanian Jewish enlighteners also began collecting books privately. Of course, private collections were known in the Jewish world from the ancient time, but the specific feature of those new collections was variety of genres and their intentional formation as academic, rather than traditional. They included literature mostly in Hebrew, in small part in Yiddish, and in European languages. More is known of Vilna Jewish bibliophiles who made a tight circle of professional intellectuals: editors, educators and literates. Among them – the above-mentioned Samuel Joseph Fin and his son Benjamin, Dov-Ber Ratner, Avraham Leib Markon, bibliographer and Bible scholar Isaac Benjacob and his son Jacob, himself a bibliographer. The most prominent figure among them was that of Matityahu Strashun, who bequeathed his collection of about 7 000 volumes to the community with the aim of making it the foundation for the first Jewish public library in Vilnius. In that way, Strashun, who during his lifetime was a significant philanthropist, presented a new, modern model of benefitting the community, to wit: giving the general public an access to the wealth of knowledge. Strashun died in 1885, and the processing of his collection began immediately after. Its Jewish part was catalogued (the first known printed catalog of a private Jewish collection in Lithuania¹³), then united with the library of the Great Synagogue – a previously unseen amalgam, that was further enriched by the donations or bequests of other representatives of the Strashun's

circle who followed his example, as well as by new acquisitions made from the money Strashun allocated for that goal by his will. The Strashun library became a fully functioning public institution with its own building in the beginning of the 20th century and was a source of pride for the pre-war Vilnius Jewish community. As one of its visitors noted in the library's guest book, "Jewish Vilna is not so much a city as an idea. If you wish to grasp this idea, visit the Strashun library"¹⁴.

The mode of using Jewish books was further changed by that library: the vastness and variety of its holdings attracted all sorts of readers who would never mix in the traditional structure of reading and study. An American Jewish historian Lucy Dawidowich who in 1936 studied in Vilnius in the postgraduate program of the Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO) and was a regular visitor of Strashun Library, vividly described its specific nature in her memoir "From That Place and Time":

"You could see the conflict between the worlds of tradition and modernity played out every day in a kind of dumb show in the reading room of the Strashun library. <...> Because the library was rich in Talmudic and rabbinic works, it was used by pious Jews for advanced study. But the wealth of its holdings in other areas of Judaica also attracted secular scholars and university students. Consequently, on any day you could see... venerable long-bearded men, wearing hats, studied Talmud, elbow-to-elbow with bare-headed young men and even young women, bare-armed in summer days, studying their texts. The old men would sometimes mutter and grumble about what the world had come to. The young men would titter"¹⁵.

7 *Mistre pariz...* neetak lisfat ever be-yad... Kalman Shulman. Vilna: Rom, 1857–1860; reprinted several times in 19th and 20th c.

8 *Divre yeme olam...* Meusaf ... al yede Kalman Shulman. 9 vol. Vilna: Rom, 1867–1884.

9 *Mosde erets* [hebr. Foundation of Earth – world geography]. 10 vol. Vilna: Rom, 1871–1877; *Mekbkere erets rusiya* [hebr. Geography of Russia]. Vilna: Rom, 1869; *Halikhot kedem* [hebr. The Ways of the East – antiquities of Palestine and Egypt]. Vilna: Rom, 1854; *Shulamit* [hebr. Sulamith – geography of Palestine and Jewish history]. Vilna: Rom, 1855, and others.

10 *Havisut troya*. Neetak mi-shire virgil haromi al yede... Mikha Yosef ben Adam Hakohen Lebenzon. Vilna: Rom, 1849.

11 *Pirkhe tsafon*, 1841 and 1843, co-editor Eliezer Lipmann Hurvits. The title of the periodical may actually be a translation from Russian, as a reference to the almanac "Northern Flowers" («Северные

цветы») that was published in St. Petersburg by Russian poets Anton Delvig (1825–1830) and Alexander Pushkin (1831), the authors that were known and cherished by Vilna Jewish enlighteners
12 *Hakarmel*, 1860–1880, co-editor from 1879 – Hayim Leib Markon.

13 *Likute shoshanim* [hebr. Gathering of Roses], red. Strashun D. Berlin: Itsikovski, 1889.

14 LATSKY-BARTOLDI, V., item in "Sefer hazahav" [hebr. The Golden Book of Guests], 28 October 1929. The book itself was lost during the Nazi occupation of Vilnius; quoted from: LUNSKY, KH. *Der Sefer hazahav* in der Strashun-bibliotek [jid. *The Golden Book* of the Strashun Library]. In *Vilner almanach*. Red. Grodzensky A. I. Vilna: Dfuz Ovnnt-kuryer, 1939, p. 43.

15 DAWIDOWICZ, L. S. *From That Place and Time. A Memoir 1938–1947*. New York; London: W.W. Norton&Co, 1989, p. 119.

But by the middle of the interwar period the Strashun library long ceased to be the only Jewish library in Vilnius or Lithuania: every school, institution or professional union, in every little town, had their book collections. Some of them are well-documented, as, for example, the library of the already mentioned YIVO institute that accumulated about 40 000 books and 10 000 sets of periodical press in different languages printed in several dozens of countries. Another example is a reading list for the students of modern religious girls school “Yavne” in Telšiai that was based on the school library collection and included works on Jewish philosophy along world literary classics in original languages: English, German, French and Latin. But some public and private libraries are known at the moment only by their survived manual catalogues and stamps on their scattered books that found their way into libraries of Lithuania (the biggest part is now preserved in Martynas Mažvydas National Library). However, even these remnants show the impressive scope of interests of Lithuanian Jewish readers, as well as their ability and willingness to read not only in Hebrew and Yiddish, but also in Polish, German, Russian, and French, and sometimes also in Arabic, Latin and Esperanto.

The interwar period saw a new boom of translations. The translations of the same writers and even same texts appeared almost simultaneously in Hebrew and Yiddish. What is especially interesting in this process is that the criteria for choosing the text for translation were not imminent to the Jewish culture, quite the opposite: the Jewish audience of interwar Lithuania became a part of the global readers community to the extent of wanting to read every famous and even fashionable literary work that was written at the time, as well as all world classics, from Greek and Roman antiquity to Indian mythology and from Lermontov to Longfellow. In independent Lithuania the interwar period saw a new beginning in cultural interchange when some texts of Jewish authors were translated into Lithuanian, and Lithuanian literature – into Hebrew and Yiddish. Lithuanian Jews’ linguistic and cultural awareness of their milieu increased so much that some Jewish texts at that time were created in Lithuanian and printed by non-Jewish publishing houses. A very prominent example is the monograph by the head of the Chair of Semitology (Semitologijos seminaras) at Vytautas Magnus University Hayim Nakhman Shapiro “Vilnius in the Modern Jewish Poetry”, published by the Lithuanian organization “The Union for the Freedom of Vilnius”¹⁶. And the Union of Jewish Fighters for the Independence of Lithuania used Lithuanian as a main language of their publications¹⁷.

The inter-bellum period was the peak of modern Jewish literary creativity in both Hebrew and Yiddish, the time when the modern Jewish literary canon was forming, amid a vivid interest of the Jewish society to that process. Due to all

those causes, the demand for books was so high that the production of Vilna Jewish publishing houses, although increased, could not fully satisfy the audience, and so public and school libraries, as well as bookstores, ordered books printed in Tel Aviv, Warsaw, Berlin and New York, to mention only a few printing centers. The audience's demand for the level of publication was also very high, and the publishing houses were obliged to excel. Some of them, such as Vilnius Publishing House of Boris Kletzkin, were especially ambitious in their projects and presented production that was exemplary in regard to editing, polygraphy and selection of authors and translators. Thus, their 1930 edition of Thomas Mann's "Der Zauberberg" was translated into Yiddish by Isaac Singer, future Nobel Prize laureate in literature¹⁸.

The major new development of this period is massive creating and translating of literature for children and young adults, and publishing periodicals for young readers. Several Jewish children's libraries were established in Vilnius and other towns. In her memoir "A Bit of Light in Darkness", a Vilnius survivor of the Holocaust, a former partisan Rachel Margolis remembers how she, then a young student of Eliza Orzeszko high school, spent summer vacation in the province with the family friends:

"I was an avid reader and read very fast. <...> In Rakov library there were almost no children's books. My mother was obliged to send big amounts of books from Vilnius Jewish children's library at Zawalna¹⁹ street. I adored going to the post office to receive those huge packs of battered books, unpack them, and enjoy the covers and the pictures. [When mother came to visit], she brought many books from the children's library, and I eagerly anticipated the joy of reading them."²⁰

À propos the 'pictures' Margolis mentions: it is the rapid development of children's literature that became an important factor in stimulating the art of book illustration among the Jewish artists of Lithuania. The most modern and avant-garde artists of the time, such as Bentsion Zukermann, Uma Olkenitsky, Dov Vladimirsky and others, known for their original works and their participation in the artistic life of Vilnius and Kaunas, made their impact in the field of the Jewish children book.

The network of secular and modernized religious Hebrew and Yiddish schools created a need for new educational materials: textbooks in every subject, Bible

16 ŠAPIRA, CH. N. *Vilnius naujojų žydų poezijoj*. Kaunas: Vilniui vaduoti sąjunga, 1935.

17 The main organ – the weekly *Apžvalga* [Review], Kaunas, 1935–1940.

18 At the time he used the pen name Bashevis,

and not Bashevis-Singer, as for his later works.

19 Now Pylimo.

20 МАРГОЛИС, Р. *Немного света во мраке*. Вильнюс, 2006, p. 57, 59.

adaptations, dictionaries, and more. These materials were not segregated by gender criterion (although some of the schools were not co-educational), because the Jewish community of Lithuania had undergone the crucial transformation of the structures and even core values of the past. Jewish girls and women not only were no longer excluded from the readers' audience – they became the most active and stimulating part, and many became authors, editors and journalists themselves. The world of a Jewish reader in Lithuania in the first part of the 20th century was versatile, intellectually stimulating, multilingual and free from gender limitations, and he had a vast choice of means for obtaining the reading materials.

To conclude

The Jewish community between the two world wars, both in Vilnius and in independent Lithuania, was a conglomerate of a still vibrant traditional segment and a wide range of modern ones – from moderately modernized to radically secular. It was a society where knowledge could be purchased by anybody, without restrictions of age, gender, or status. It was also a community that operated in several languages, and not only in the Jewish ones. This diversion was at the same time a result of important changes in its cultural identity and a source of constant new ones. All these processes were reflected in its culture of reading: who, what, when, where, and why. The organic existence of this community was tragically and abruptly cut; the books it left behind can help us reconstruct its social and intellectual profile.

Literature

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LIETUVOS ŽYDŲ SKAITYMO KULTŪROS TRANSFORMACIJOS XIX A. – XX A. PIRMOJE PUSĖJE

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Santrauka

Straipsnis skiriamas pasikeitimams, aptariamam laikotarpiu patirtiems Lietuvos žydų bendruomenės, naudojusios knygą kultūriniais ir edukaciniais tikslais. Modernėjimo procesas atnešė naujų, besiskiriančių nuo tradicinei bendruomenei būdingų žydų knygos turinio, formų bei funkcionalumo idėjų. Pasikeitimai iš pradžių buvo inicijuoti žydų Apšvietos veikėjų, o nuo XX amžiaus jų dvasiniais įpėdiniais tapo įvairios visuomenės grupės – tiek iš tradicinio bendruomenės segmento, tiek iš sekuliarių, socialiai aktyvių bei kitokių jėgų. Transformavosi tiek knygų spausdinimas (repertuaro plėtotė, naujų auditorijų ir jų poreikių projektavimas, pasaulio literatūros ir mokslo darbų vertimų pagausėjimas, žydų vaikų literatūros „bumas“), tiek knygų vartojimas (spartus įvairiarūšių bibliotekų tinklo plėtojimas, senų knygų, kaip kultūros objektų, saugojimas kultūros ir švietimo organizacijų archyvuose ir kt.). Straipsnyje supažindinama su procesais ir reiškiniiais, suformavusiais Vilniaus ir Lietuvos žydų skaitytojų auditoriją kaip diferencijuotą, daugiakalbę, turinčią gausius skaitymo poreikius ir aukštus skaitymo produkcijos reikalavimus. Taip pat aptariama šių kultūrinių poreikių tenkinimo būdų raida. Nacių okupacija sunaikino šią bendruomenę kaip unikalią visumą, tad šiandien įvairiose Lietuvos bibliotekose išlikę spaudiniai gali padėti atkurti žydų bendruomenės dvasinį gyvenimą, kai jis dar buvo aktyvus ir organiškas.

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