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JUSTIN D. CAMMY

The Politics of Home, The Culture of Place:  
The „Yung-Vilne“ Miscellany of Literature and Art (1934–1936)

It was not until 1934 – five years after it was introduced under the banner „Yung-Vilne“ [Young Vilna]<sup>1</sup> in a special weekend insert of the Yiddishist daily „Vilner tog“<sup>2</sup> – that a local group of young Yiddish writers, poets, and artists established a journal to showcase its creative work. „Yung-Vilne: Miscellany of Literature and Art“ appeared yearly between 1934 and 1936. Its three issues marked the group’s most sustained effort to advertise itself collectively in print, providing a unique perspective both on its collective self-image and on its members’ individual styles.

„Yung-Vilne“ was what literary scholars define as a „little magazine“.<sup>3</sup> Little magazines were not so much journals as they were artistic experiments of the avant-garde. Since the little magazine, historically, was an organ of high culture it was rarely a commercial success. Most only managed to publish a few issues before their editors lost interest, their contributors moved on to more established publications, or finances precluded further publication. Indeed, the history of twentieth century modernism – Yiddish literary modernism included – can be written through study of the little magazine. In Jewish Eastern Europe alone, little magazines such as „Yung Yidish“ [Young Yiddish] in Łódź, „Ringn“ [Links] in Warsaw, „Khaliastre“ [The Gang] in Warsaw and Paris, „Albatros“ in Berlin and Warsaw, and „Eygn’s“<sup>4</sup>

- 1 For more about the origins of the group and a list of its core membership, see my article: „Tsevorfene bleter“: The Emergence of Yung Vilne, in: Polin 14 (2001), 170–191. See also Rachel Ertel: Portrait de groupe avec jeunes poètes, in: Lituanie juive 1918–1940, ed. Yves Plasseraud and Henri Minczeles, Paris 1996, 215–234; – Abraham Novershtern: Yung-Vilne: The Political Dimension of Literature, in: The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars, ed. Yisrael Gutman et al., London 1989, 383–398. See also the „Yung-Vilne“ issue of Di goldene keyt 101 (1980).
- 2 Der araynmarsh fun yung vilne in der yidisher literatur [Young Vilna Marches Into Yiddish Literature], in: Vilner Tog (October 11, 1929).
- 3 See Frederick Hoffman et al. (ed.): The Little Magazine. A History and a Bibliography, Princeton 1947.
- 4 Yung Yidish (Łódź 1919); – Ringn (Warsaw 1921–22); – Khaliastre (Warsaw 1922, Paris 1924); – Albatros (Berlin 1922, Warsaw 1923); – Eygn’s (Kiev 1918–1920); – Shtrom (Moscow 1922–1924). See also Rachel Ertel (ed.): Khaliastira [La bande], Paris 1989; – Seth Wolitz: Between Folk and Freedom: The Failure of the Yiddish Modernist Movement in Poland, in: Yiddish 8 (1991) 1, 26–51; – Seth Wolitz: Di khalyastre, the Yiddish Modernist Movement in Poland: An Overview, in: Yiddish 4 (1981) 3, 5–19; – Arthur

[Possession] in Kiev proclaimed Yiddish literature as a full partner and competitor in the broader modernist revolution.

„Yung-Vilne“'s decision to publish a little magazine was motivated by several considerations. First, it was intended to expand recognition of the group beyond the borders of Vilna. Though several members had managed to publish fragments of their work in national and even international Yiddish journals and newspapers, „Yung-Vilne“ believed that a heightening of the group's collective reputation would further enhance the individual opportunities of each of its members. Any Yiddish group that hoped to be taken seriously was expected to issue its own publication as a statement of its self-confidence. Next, as a literary object a magazine seemed to suggest a higher degree of collective material permanence than publication of individual stories or poems in someone else's newspaper or periodical. Third, „Yung-Vilne“ was a useful forum in which to report on the group's achievements and to announce forthcoming events. For instance, the group chronicle at the end of the 1936 issue talks of „Yung-Vilne“'s travels to Grodno and Białystok, of its members' contribution to the theater scene in Vilna, and of the establishment of a speaker's bureau to respond to requests from local organizations and towns in the surrounding provinces who sought contact with Yiddish cultural figures.<sup>5</sup> Fourth, the magazine was an opportunity for the group to reflect upon precisely what it meant to bear the mythic weight of Vilna in its name. On the one hand, the city's reputation as a center of both traditional misnagdic culture and secular literary and political awakening advertised the quality of the young Yiddish writers and artists who bore its name even before they proved it. On the other hand, its nominal editor, Shmerke Kaczerginski, wanted to cast an image of the group as a promoter of a new aesthetic-political symbiosis in Yiddish writing that was not necessarily rooted in the particulars of place. Works that contained specific local flavor were minimized in favor of pieces that spoke to more universal concerns. Finally, the magazine sought to repudiate the elitism that earlier publications of the Yiddish literary avant-gardes had communicated. Though it borrowed from the example of little magazines such as „Yung Yidish“ and „Khaliastre“ that were among the first to combine effectively the work of plastic artists and literature, by the 1930s „Yung-Vilne“ no longer believed that the success of the Yiddish literary modernism could be measured by the degree to which it alienated audiences or subverted the dominant literary culture. A very different dynamic was at work in „Yung-Vilne“ that sought to merge its members' aspirations for entry into Yiddish literary high culture with their deeply ingrained social consciousness and concern for the mass culture from which they had emerged. By appealing both to the Yiddish working-class through material that reflected its anxieties, and to more sophisticated readers by feathering in stylistically

or thematically provocative works, „Yung-Vilne“ promoted a synthesizing principle that allowed it to write for two audiences simultaneously. In doing so, the journal heralded „Yung-Vilne“'s self-image as the standard bearer of an Eastern European Yiddish populist modernism.

Since common social origins, generation, and sense of place provided group members with a natural unifying framework, „Yung-Vilne“ never felt the need for a literary manifesto. The lack of a bold manifesto was, in some ways, an ideological statement in itself. It invited readers to explore the magazine's content to determine for themselves what the group represented. Though one critic complained – „Where is the programmatic article?“ – its absence allowed „Yung-Vilne“ to absorb a temperamental mix of emerging talents without imposing an overt litmus test of artistic or ideological solidarity in advance. If a fiery theoretical or political tract had always been one of the *raison d'être* for the establishment of a little magazine, „Yung-Vilne“ was a disappointment. In its maiden issue, the group introduced itself and its goals in the most dispassionate of ways:

„Yung-Vilne – a young artistic group – was founded five years ago. The goal was to gather together in one circle the young poets and artists in Vilna to create possibilities for self-development. This poetic group first appeared five years ago in a specially dedicated insert to the ‚Vilner Tog‘. The group's first public artistic evening was also held then. Other evenings followed each year thereafter. Since that time members of Yung-Vilne have published in a number of periodicals, including the ‚Vilner Tog‘, ‚Literarische Bleter‘, ‚Tsukunft‘, ‚Oyfkum‘, and others. Its visual artists have participated in exhibitions in Vilna, Białystok, and Warsaw. Over the past five years the membership of Yung-Vilne has shifted. Some members emigrated abroad. A few new ones joined. This is the first attempt to publish a common journal, something that was not possible until now due to financial difficulties.“<sup>6</sup>

Despite its phlegmatic tone, the introductory statement does reveal certain clues about the group's self-image. For one, it does not refer to „Yung-Vilne“ as a new movement in Yiddish literature, but rather as an artistic group designed to promote self-development. „Yung-Vilne“ did not set itself in direct opposition to any pre-existing literary trends, but rather emphasized the importance of providing an address for literary comradeship and a forum for new talents at which they could present their newest work. Second, in referring to itself as a group of „poets and artists“, „Yung-Vilne“ acknowledged its desire to have Yiddish visual and literary culture feed off of one another. Indeed, the very idea to organize a group of young Jewish artists in Vilna was fueled by the success of a local art exhibition in 1927 – „From the Synagogue Courtyard to Glazier's Street“. Third, in officially dating its origins to 1929, and then detailing its members' appearances in print and exhibi-

Tilo-Alt, *Ambivalence Toward Modernism: The Yiddish Avant-Garde and Its Manifestoes*, in: *Yiddish* 8 (1991) 1, 52–61

5 *Fun unzere shraybtshn*, in: *Yung-Vilne* 3 (1936), 94–97

6 *Yung-Vilne* 1 (1934), 1.

tions, the magazine's introduction attempted to establish some historical depth for the group's existence. It used the group's first appearance in the „Vilner tog" both to call attention to the stamp of approval by the local literary establishment, and to deflect attention away from the fact that many of its current members remained unpublished neophytes. Fourth, in referring to the fluid membership of the group, it alluded to the difficulties of retaining a fixed membership during the difficult economic, political, and social transitions that consumed Eastern European Jewish youth in the inter-war period.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, the group's apology for its inability to publish a journal prior to 1934 due to financial constraints underscores the practical challenges to Vilna's ability to sustain itself as a center of the Yiddish republic of letters. For all the talk from its cultural leaders about the importance of promoting youth culture and Yiddish creativity, its newest young literary vanguard was scarcely able to scrape together the necessary funds for even the most modest publication.

„Yung-Vilne" never officially committed itself collectively to any one political program – a radical move in perhaps the most politicized moment of Jewish life in inter-war Poland. Nevertheless, the journal leaned to the far left by virtue of the political commitments of its members, all of whom shared similar social origins in the working class, and most of whom were products of the city's secular Yiddishist educational system. An additional clue regarding political sympathies emerges from the group's decision to phoneticize all Hebrew words in its magazine. „Yung-Vilne" remained coy as to the reasons for this move. It may have been an attempt by the group to stake out modernist credentials by modeling itself upon the example set by the Introspectivist poets [Inzikhistn] in New York, who had sought to equalize all constituent elements of the Yiddish language by forcing Hebrew words to be spelt according to the Yiddish orthographic system. Or, it may have been a political gesture signaling „Yung-Vilne"'s alliance with Soviet Yiddish culture that had liberated itself from the religious connotations of Hebrew words by emptying them of their authentic form. Or, as I believe, it may have been an attempt at a new aesthetic-political symbiosis – an effort to stake out a populist and modernist position at one and the same time.

„Yung-Vilne"'s initial publication in 1934, its lack of a manifesto, its radical political orientation, and its phoneticized spelling of Hebrew words raise questions

7 For instance, one of the group's earliest members drowned himself in the city's Vilya river because he could no longer hide his secular literary ambitions from his father, the rabbi of the Vilna suburb of Shnipeshok. Another, the prose writer Henekh Soloveytshik, escaped to the east when he became convinced that the future of autonomous Yiddish culture lay not in xenophobic Poland but in the Soviet Union across the border which was busy proclaiming the „autonomous" Jewish territory of Birobidžan. Yet another, Abraham Joshua Heschel, determined that his flirtation with Yiddish poetry was not as serious an endeavor as his interest in Jewish philosophy. It was not until 1934, when Abraham Sutzkever's application to the group was re-visited and approved (his initial application had been rejected earlier due to his poetry's alleged social detachment) that the group's membership stabilized.

as to whether it served, unbeknownst to most of its members, as a communist front publication.<sup>8</sup> In 1934, the Jewish bureau of the communist party (TsaBaZH) stepped up its efforts to inspire a wider Jewish „folks-front" and to reduce the power of its main political competitor on the political left, the socialist Bund. In precisely the same year as „Yung-Vilne"'s initial appearance, TsaBaZH funneled support to a pro-communist group of writers in Warsaw,<sup>9</sup> and provided money to establish „Fraynd" [Friend], a daily newspaper in Warsaw, and a publication in Montevideo edited by Berl Halperin. Like the majority of „Yung-Vilne" members, most of the contributors to „Fraynd" sympathized with the political left, but were not themselves members of the communist party. It is unlikely they would knowingly have contributed to a front publication.<sup>10</sup> Shmerke Kaczerginski, the magazine's nominal editor, was a member of the outlawed Polish Communist Party (KPP), providing him with the opportunity to cultivate such financial resources. Though no document exists either to prove or dispel a link between „Yung-Vilne" and TsaBaZH, the coincidence of timing suggests a coordinated effort to secretly harness Yiddish creative talents to the cause of the communist international. If „Yung-Vilne" was partially and secretly funded by TsaBaZH through Kaczerginski, this might help to explain why he resisted the publication of a manifesto in the magazine that would have forced the group into a messy debate about an „official" political position, perhaps even exposing his hidden agenda. Fearing the consequences of both the Polish censors and his colleague's ire, he used his editorial position to solicit socially engaged submissions, trusting that the magazine's contents would speak for themselves. In this way, „Yung-Vilne" would offer readers a useful introduction to the competing personalities, political allegiances, and artistic streams within the group as a whole. The magazine sought to promote a cohesive image of a young, native born literati to an international Yiddish readership, though its members were not at all in agreement as to the degree to which local lore and contemporary political concerns ought to be highlighted in their creative work. „Yung-Vilne"'s very nature as a collective publication allowed it to highlight the sharp temperamental and artistic differences between its members.

8 My thanks to Dr. Gennady Estrakh for encouraging me to investigate this possibility.

9 Novershtern: *Yung Vilne*, 390. The group included such figures as Kalmen Lis, Binem Heler, Dovid Mitsmakher, Dovid Sfard, Binyomen Shlevin and Moyshe Shulshteyn who together were published in the Soviet anthology *Lebn un kamf: Zamlbukh fun der yidisher linker literatur in polyn* [Life and Struggle: Miscellany of Yiddish Leftist Literature in Poland], Minsk 1936.

10 Dovid Sfard: *Mit zikh un mit andere* [With Myself and With Others], in *Yerushalimer almanakh* (1984), 58–69.

*Visual Artistry*

The magazine's visual art speaks to the contradictory impulses behind its effort to forge a populist modernism. Earlier avant-garde Yiddish little magazines in Poland such as „Yung Yidish“ and „Khaliastre“ had used visual images as a destabilizing force in order to proclaim their emancipation from Yiddishist folkism. For instance, the linoleum block-print cover of „Khaliastre“ [fig. 1] communicates the group's high modernist aspirations. The Yiddish letters that constitute the group's name – „the gang“ – are formed with aggressive lines that conjure the horror of the immediate post-war period. They are spaced in such a way so as to resist easy comprehension, serving instead as threatening symbols of modern dislocation. The artists who gathered around „Yung Yidish“ and „Khaliastre“ asserted their kinship with the European avant-garde by fusing elements of German expressionism and Russian futurism with their own national iconography. These artists also followed closely the activities of their Polish contemporaries who gathered around such literary and art publications as „Zdrój“ [Source] and „Bunt“ [Rebellion].<sup>11</sup>

By the time „Yung-Vilne“ appeared on the scene a decade later, the non-representational moment had lost its cachet. As the decade progressed the influence of Soviet social realism was felt in Vilna, and the group's artists were increasingly persuaded that visual art ought to serve as a mirror for national experience. Bentsye Mikhtom's linoleum engravings for the covers of the first two issues of „Yung-Vilne“ are a synthesis of recognizable local scenery, anonymous industrial cityscapes, and expressionistic idealism. The cover for the 1934 issue [fig. 2] is dominated by a rising sun emerging from behind a brick wall, a set of smoking chimneys, and skyscrapers. The structures signal the group's origins and affinities with the urban working-class, while the rising sun connotes „Yung-Vilne“'s self-conscious youth and progressiveness. At the bottom left of the image we find a depiction of a crooked alley and a series of archways. These evoke the recognizable landscape of Vilna's pre-modern, traditional Jewish quarter. The visual combination of local Jewish particularism, abstract urban industrialism, and sunny enthusiasm capture the radical mood and harmonizing impulses at work within the group as a whole. The image makes it quite clear that the traditional values represented by the old Jewish quarter of Vilna are ever present in the group's consciousness, yet no longer function as the dominant influence on the group's creativity. The cover of the 1935 issue [fig. 3] is even bolder, combining elements of expressionism and cubism. It features a stylized human figure composed of sharp, geometric lines. The figure's arm and head are raised towards the heavens, symbolic of youthful striving. Though its feet are firmly planted in a row of crooked structures and cobblestones that are scattered

<sup>11</sup> For more on the fine artists of Yung Yidish and Khaliastre, see Jerzy Malinowski: *The Yung Yiddish Group and Jewish Modern Art in Poland 1918–1923*, in: *Polin* 6 (1991), 223–230.

along the bottom part of the page (buildings which conjured Vilna's crowded, decrepit Jewish courtyards and alleys) the strong figure towers over them as if it had outgrown them. Like the arc on the cover of the 1934 issue that connects the alleys of the Jewish quarter to the modern city, the stylized arc that constitutes the group's name in the 1935 issue suggests that the group saw itself as a bridge between Vilna's traditional past and its modern present.

If Mikhtom's covers privileged the group's utopian impulses, his images within the three issues of „Yung-Vilne“ offered up a less euphoric visual narrative of poverty, grayness and isolation. His engravings and sketches capture the psychological degradation of social injustice (for instance, an impoverished family in its shadowy cellar, pleading hands extending through prison bars, a street beggar forced up against a wall). The art within justified the need for the social radicalism proclaimed on the covers.

Apart from his art within the pages of „Yung-Vilne“, Mikhtom was asked to design an emblem for the group [fig. 4]. The final product eschewed his more universal imagery for something that drew directly from local iconography. Mikhtom provided pride of place to Jewish Vilna's recognizable urban geography. The group emblem depicted a winding, cobbled street with two archways from the Jewish quarter. Sprouting upwards and out of the archway in the foreground is a young, blossoming tree. The name of the group appears below the emblem in bold, futurist type. In taking as his central image a symbol of natural regeneration emerging from the walls of the traditional Jewish quarter, Mikhtom signaled „Yung-Vilne“'s tacit acceptance of its mission as the modern expression and re-interpretation of local Jewish culture. The emblem was included on the group's public announcements and stationary. „Yung-Vilne“'s Sabbath afternoon gatherings around Mikhtom's kitchen table helped to forge a fellowship of young writers and visual artists, and to attract to the group artists such as Rokhl Sutzkever and Rafael Khvoles. Their participation at exhibitions during the 1930s enhanced „Yung-Vilne“'s reputation on the Polish Jewish art scene.<sup>13</sup> But historian Lucy Dawidowicz, used to the sophisticated art scene in New York, was not impressed by her visit to a „Yung-Vilne“ art exhibition: „The charcoal drawings that I saw had

<sup>13</sup> The archives of the Jewish State Museum of Lithuania have copies of catalogues featuring works of „Yung-Vilne“ members which are helpful in the reconstruction of their careers during this period: *Oysshtelung fun yidisher plastiker fun dem kunst muzey baym yivo in zal tsum ondenk fun Rive Aytingon* [Exhibition of Jewish Artists of the Yivo Art Museum in the Hall in Memory of Rive Aytingon], Vilna, August 14–19, 1935; – *Oysshtelung fun di yunge yidishe kinstler-plastiker* [Exhibition of Young Jewish Artists], Vilna, April–May 1937; – *Bilder oysshtelung fun Rokhl Sutzkever* [Painting Exhibition of Rokhl Sutzkever], Vilna, November–December 1938. Also helpful in this regard is the brief bio-bibliographic sketch by Yosef Sandel: *Di kinstler-plastiker fun Yung-Vilne* [The Artists of Young Vilna] and the „Chronicle of Yung-Vilne“, both in: *Literarische bleter* (February 26, 1937), 144–145.

little individuality, most of them reflecting the combined influences of Käthe Kollwitz and socialist realism [...] Vilna had no resources for training and developing artists and art appreciation, nor did the Jews there have a sufficient tradition to build on [...] Nor did Vilna have the facilities, except perhaps through the elementary schools, to foster appreciation of, and develop the taste for, the fine arts.<sup>14</sup> In collectively resisting abstract art and eschewing avant-garde art theory, the group's artists established a visual corollary to the work of its writers, the many of whom heeded Goethe's admonition that „he who separates poetry from life separates life from poetry“.

### *The Prose of Everyday Life*

Though not yet a household name when he joined the ranks of „Yung-Vilne“ in late 1929, Shmerke Kaczerginski was already the anonymous troubadour of the workers. His popular folksongs spoke the language of the disenfranchised:

Fathers, mothers, children building the barricade  
Regiments of laborers in the streets on parade.

At dawn he left for the factory  
Father won't be back today.

The children know that daddy won't come,  
He took to the street with his gun...<sup>15</sup>

The poem transforms economic and social marginalization into a revolutionary nursery rhyme. Shmerke's ability to walk the fine line between political activism and Yiddish literary culture made him a hero to the local masses, and it wasn't long before he was known all over town as Khaver [Comrade] Shmerke. Few would have predicted when he joined „Yung-Vilne“ in 1929 that he would emerge as the embodiment of the group's dynamism, guiding it through its period of greatest productivity. Aspiring artists gathered at his home to sing, dance, recite poetry, and argue the world until late in the evening. When „Yung-Vilne“ was not at his apartment, Kaczerginski held court over a round of drinks and song at „Velfkeh's“ [Wolfie's], a tavern-restaurant on ulica Żydowska in the heart of the Jewish quarter favored by Jewish Vilna's intelligentsia, writers, and droshky-drivers.<sup>16</sup> He organized all of the group's public literary events during the 1930s, coordinated the

publications of the „Yung-Vilne“ magazine, printed up stationary to provide the group with an official patina, and even took it upon himself to boost the confidence of colleagues when they grew discouraged. As Chaim Grade, one of Kaczerginski's recruits, recalls: „He always walked down the street in the center of the group [...] it was Shmerke who took me from the study house and taught me what youth was all about. He was always laughing.“<sup>17</sup> Though Kaczerginski was widely admired as the „soul“<sup>18</sup> and „nerve“<sup>19</sup> of „Yung-Vilne“, the energies he expended as the group's manager and social coordinator left him little time to develop his own literary ambitions. In the late 1930s, he was at work on an ambitious novel about his generation, „Yugnt on freyd“ [Youth Without Joy], but the manuscript was lost during the upheaval of war.

In Kaczerginski's preferred genre of the reportage, he described Vilna's streets, back alleys, and institutions (such the famous Rom printing press). For instance, in „Amnesty“<sup>20</sup> he drew from experience to present the plight of political prisoners in Polish jails. His most ambitious submission to „Yung-Vilne“ was the story „Moniek in His Circle“.<sup>21</sup> In it he offered up a generational portrait, devoid of his trademark proletarian sympathies. The fictional narrative concentrates on a circle of Jewish students at a gymnasium in an undefined Polish city. One of them, Moniek, idles his mornings away in bed and spends his nights in smoke filled cellars where he and his cohort gamble away the money their families have sent them to support their education. Moniek is portrayed as a haunted bum who is held back by his own fears of failure and the lethargy of a depression that gives young people no scope for their ambition.

The group's other prose writer, Moyshe Levin, excelled in realist and naturalist fiction focusing on Vilna's urban poor. His stories undermined romantic, sentimental readings of Vilna by offering up vignettes of local working class life. The condition of his subjects is frequently one of anomy, alienation, humiliation, and fallen virtue. The modern city itself – with its congested, claustrophobic streets and lines of humming electric wires personified as hissing snakes – is shown to be complicit in the suffering of its inhabitants. Levin's literary universe is intimately tied to material realities. It is a world where a droshky-driver picks up a pair of police officers who need to be taken to the commissariat, only to realize that their detainee is his estranged prostitute daughter.<sup>22</sup>

17 Chaim Grade: Shmerke Kaczerginski: Rede gehalt'n tsu di shloyshim, in: Tsukunft (July-August 1954), 277-278.

18 Chaim Grade: Eykh nafu giborim, in: Shmerke Kaczerginski ondenk bukh, 44.

19 Yankev Botashanski: Shmerke Kaczerginski – der praktisher dikhter fun Yung-Vilne [Shmerke Kaczerginski – the practical poet of Young Vilna], in: Shmerke Kaczerginski ondenk bukh, 29.

20 Amnestye, in: Yung-Vilne 1 (1934), 25-28.

21 Moniek in zayn svive, Yung-Vilne 3 (1936), 68-78.

22 Motye Droshker [Motye the Cabman], in: Yung-Vilne 1 (1934), 9-18 (reprinted in: Moyshe Levin: Friling in keltershtub [Spring in the Cellar], Vilna 1937, 77-86).

14 Lucy Dawidowicz: *From That Place and Time*, New York 1989, 137.

15 Excerpt from „Tates, Mames, Kinderlekh“ [Fathers, Mothers, Children], lyrics by Sh. Kaczerginski, music by A. Brudno, in: Shmerke Kaczerginski ondenk bukh [Memory Book in Honor of Shmerke Kaczerginski], Buenos Aires 1955, 229-230. This translation, and all following, are the author's.

16 Lucy Dawidowicz: *From that Place and Time*, 121-122.

Levin distinguished himself from Kaczerginski by being unabashedly „Vilnerish“ in his writings. If several of his colleagues in „Yung-Vilne“ strove for universalism by freeing themselves from „parochial“ references, his best work excelled in its local detail. His prose reflected a broad consensus within „Yung-Vilne“ that young Jews should not solve their problems by abandonment of the Eastern European homeland by emigration to America, Palestine or the USSR. Indeed, the entire mood of „Yung-Vilne“ is one of dynamism „afn ort“ [in place], a type of cultural self-assertiveness designed to confront those who would seek to drive the Jews away. Those who looked at the Land of Israel to make a home for themselves were portrayed as traitors by Levin, as in „Shmulyes shtub fort avek“ [Shmuel's Household Runs Away].<sup>23</sup> His sympathies lie with those who stubbornly resolve to tough it out in their ancestral homeland, foregoing the fantasy of the Land of Israel for the realities of Jewish Poland. In so doing, he re-enforced the group's broad commitment to „do-ism“ [here-ness].

#### *Varieties of Lyric Expression*

Kaczerginski and Levin secured the group's credentials with the Jewish street. Nevertheless, prose occupied a secondary position to poetry within the hierarchy of the group, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The point was highlighted in the final issue of „Yung-Vilne“ in 1936 when a different typeset was used to distinguish between its poetic and prose selections. „Yung-Vilne“'s poets were eager to show themselves in step with the increasing politicization of their generation. Yet it was through poetry that the group first achieved, then maintained its artistic reputation. The group's three most important poets – Leyzer Volf, Chaim Grade, and Abraham Sutzkever – defined „Yung-Vilne“'s most influential poetic streams – the parodic, the prophetic, and the lyrical. But „Yung-Vilne“ also included a vibrant supporting cast of poets, each of whom claimed a unique poetic territory.

Though Perets Miranski was among the last members to be accepted into „Yung-Vilne“ in 1934, his arrival expanded the group's poetic repertoire by having a fabulist in its ranks. He was attracted to the fable for its dramatic potential, its sharp comedic edge, and its moral persuasiveness. It did not hurt that the genre was still unclaimed territory in „Yung-Vilne“ at that time, allowing him to claim it as his own without fear of competition.

<sup>23</sup> Shmulyes shtub fort avek, in: Almanakh fun yidishn literatn un zhurnalstn farayn in vilne (1938), 112–121.

In the kitchen of wealthy Reb Traytl  
An axe found herself a neighbor with a chunk of wood.  
Eyeing the block closely  
she recognized him as the son of the maple tree,  
both stemming from the same father and mother.  
And as she lay across from him  
the axe began to question the block of wood:  
It seems to me that we are siblings  
Who grew up in the same bark, in the same clothing,  
Two sprouts from the same maple.  
So why are you so estranged from me now?  
With simplicity and rawness,  
The chunk of wood answered the axe as follows:  
Do you know why you are so repugnant to me?  
Because whenever  
Somebody dresses you in a hat of steel  
You obey the hand that sends you out to murder brothers.<sup>24</sup>

Everything is subordinated to the moral. The poet uses the voices of the axe and the block of wood as stand-ins for the master-slave relationship in society. In the steel-crowned axe's recognition that it shares the same origins as a humble block of wood, Miranski is able to underline the fact that all men are brothers. He suggests that cultural, national and economic animosities are anathema to the natural order of things. The axe's inability to recognize that its sharp blade is a source of mortal threat to the piece of wood points to the almost unbridgeable abyss between the powerful and the powerless. Though the axe itself does not set out to chop others down, the chunk of wood reminds him that he does not do anything to inhibit others from using him for murderous purposes. In so doing, the poet reminds his readers that justice is the responsibility of everyone in society. Audiences appreciated that underneath the surface of his surrealist works he was really talking about and to them.

By contrast, Elkhonen Vogler's tendency was to use poetry to escape from reality. His book length poems, rooted in the flora and fauna of the Lithuanian countryside where he grew up, are constructed of metaphor upon metaphor, of a Yiddish weighted down with Slavisms and Hebraisms, and of a fabulist's predilection for animating the natural universe. As a result, his writing claimed a strange position within the group as something that was admired for its originality, but never truly understood due to the difficulties of its style, language, and imagery. Vogler transformed his pain and loneliness into the very subject of his writing. But unlike his colleagues who turned to realism as a means to best express

<sup>24</sup> Der shaytl holts un di taperiske [The Chunk of Wood and the Axe], in: Yung-Vilne 3 (1936), 93.

their frustrations, he increasingly lost himself in his stylized metaphorical language as a way to resist direct confrontation with the pain of everyday life. For instance, in the second issue of „Yung-Vilne“, he offered a meta-poetic interpretation of his craft in the poem „Tsevorfene bleter“ [Scattered Pages or Scattered Leaves]:

The world is a book by a crazy poet  
The days and nights watch over him  
The villages – its fallen pages  
And the cities – its hard covers.

... Every letter – a peasant and every word – a family  
The marks – dots and dashes – the animals –  
Dogs and wolves – barks, howls, moos, and then silence  
People weep – and their tears are the commas.

Every letter – a peasant, and every word – a family  
Consumed like cereal from the same spoon.  
The exclamation mark is Yuzshikn's little crutch  
And the question mark – his lame foot...

... The poet tears the hair from his head  
and rolls little cigarettes from the pages his book.  
When he smokes – the forests are ablaze, the animals burn in the barns  
And the peasants – in their huts.<sup>25</sup>

The very marks of language and grammar contain within them the signs of the sick condition of the world. Though he recognizes that his ability to see the fate of humanity reflected in non-human forms might itself be a form of delusion, he treats them as the stuff of reality. The pages that are consumed by flames (perhaps an allusion to censorship or the harsh comments of critics), the hard covers of his books that feel to him as heartless as the modern city, the fallen pages of his notebook that are like the forgotten villages and shtetlekh of the provinces – all of these metaphors reveal as much as they conceal. In order to be moved by such verse, the reader must recognize Vogler as a consummate introspectivist whose private metaphorical landscape is designed to frustrate logical explanation as much as it invites readers to relate to their surroundings in new ways.

The zaniest moments in the magazine occurred when its poetic parodist, Leyzer Volf, published a poem that had earlier left audiences howling with laughter and confusion after one of „Yung-Vilne“'s public readings. Volf's earthy images seemed a more familiar, accessible part of the tradition of Yiddish satire and folk language, even when they were startlingly new:

The night is white as a banana,  
The shadows are sweet as tarts,  
Where are you my dear Mariana?  
The goats are singing tenderly in the garden.

The mushrooms wear little red hats.  
The waterfalls coolly dream.  
The nightingales chew their cud  
Over your young, sweet silvery name.

Moons doze on the branches  
And bathe themselves in milk and Honey.  
I sit under the fig tree  
As my ephemeral cold tears flow.

Where are you, where? In which spheres?  
Will I ever again touch  
your sacred dented brow  
of seventy-one colors?

Will I stroke your eyes,  
Will I color your locks?  
Oh, no! You flew off  
for all eternity like a mean braggart.<sup>26</sup>

With farcical similes and seemingly random images, Volf parodies three poetic genres simultaneously: the sentimental lyric of the forlorn lover, the popular cadences of the Yiddish folk-song (long symbolized by the Golden Peacock) and the nostalgic poem of Jewish exile, with the speaker's yearning to rest under a fig tree in a land of milk and honey. Alienated from both the Yiddish and Western aesthetic traditions, the poem reflects the anxieties of the modern Jewish writer trapped between a longing for the simple comforts of the old and the disturbing possibilities of the new, yet not able to possess either. The speaker's allusive longings to rest in the ancient Jewish homeland only accentuate the juxtaposition between his fantasies of peace in a comforting environment and his actual zany condition. The unsettled laughter of his audiences points to Volf's ability to offer up poetry as a collective release from every day concerns.

Chaim Grade's debut in the pages of „Yung-Vilne“ invoked the familiar rhetoric of revolution, only to undermine it by focusing not on collective mobilization but on the ambivalence of the poet himself to his own calling. He resented Kaczerginski's attempts to influence the tenor of his writing, and responded with an ironic eye to the sloganeering of the period: „Hey, khaver grade, hey khaver grade/ kum shlis zikh on on der royter brigade“ [Hey, comrade Grade, hey comrade Grade/ Come join

25 Tsevorfene bleter, in: Yung-Vilne 2 (1935), 33–38.

26 Yung-Vilne 2 (1935), 63.



the Red Brigade] In using his last name as the basis for his poem's subsequent rhyming couplets (Grade/brigade/defilade/avade) the poet underlined the comedy of the prevailing demand that poets necessarily serve the cause of political leftism. Locals enjoyed parodying Grade's play with his name by substituting their own rhymes such as „limonade“, „shokolade“, „marmelade“, and „olimpiade“. Grade also used the pages of „Yung-Vilne“ to perform his own crisis of faith. The result was a rewriting of the biblical episode of Ezekiel in the valley of the bones. For Grade the great lie of both religion and contemporary forms of political messianism was the false promise of redemption. What better way to de-sacrilize both God and politics, and to express the poet's own sense of hopelessness than to conclude with a grotesque scene of a people doomed to its own destruction?

I will only wake you once, corpses, just once  
I am also a corpse, I cry: Now or never.

... The prophet storms the bony rows  
that twist and turn possessed in the valley:

– Awakened, you must demonstrate further miracles  
than coming alive: cross the barrier!

... In the end they fall down in dizziness  
and return to a scattering of limbs.

Ezekiel pulls off his head in sorrow  
And no longer is ... the darkness snarls: Die!

Back to your graves, accursed corpses  
In one grave – a hundred, and one [scattered among] hundreds of graves!

Thus shall you lie from now to eternity  
And if anyone wakes you – fall back into dust!

... And a groan runs through the heaps of bones:  
– the prophet, the prophet – is no more...<sup>27</sup>

Individual despair and national tragedy become one in Ezekiel's impotent raising of the dead. Despite his best efforts, the nation's spirit has been so depleted by its experience in the valley of death that it cannot muster up the necessary faith or conviction to make living another day worthwhile. The entire nightmare vision was a symbol for the contemporary existence of Jews in Eastern Europe. Ezekiel's inability to raise the dead was intended not only as a measure of God's impotence to inspire such dreams of national revival, but also of the poet's unwillingness to revive the nation with words of false comfort. The finality of Ezekiel's failure was a pro-

27 Yekhezkel [Ezekiel], in: Yung-Vilne 2 (1935), 50–52. The poem became the basis for a long poetic cycle by the same title, published in Grade's first book of poetry, Yo (1936).

jection of Grade's own fears about the purpose of his poetic calling. He invoked the prophetic mode against itself to show how the Yiddish poet – the modern day prophet to the masses – recoils from the expectation that he be responsible for the revival of his brethren from their European valley of dry bones.

It was Abraham Sutzkever though – the group's most stubborn aesthete – who most vigorously defended the autonomy of his writing from the pressures of time and place. In „At the Outset of the Day“, he harnesses words such as „liberation“, „flag“ and „dream“ not for political ends but as part of the lyric expression of his own genesis as a writer: „At the threshold of the day, a plain new day/ I come to liberate myself with my own might. [...] My dream is sharp like my era, like my generation, and/ it ignites the wick of extinguished years. [...] The sun is my banner and the word is my anchor.“<sup>28</sup> Sutzkever subverted contemporary political imagery by aligning himself with the uncorrupted worlds of nature and poetry over that of man. He preferred to publish in „Inzikh“, the leading journal of American Yiddish modernism, rather than in the politicized pages of „Yung-Vilne“. Though his colleagues were slow to realize it, Sutzkever resolved to serve them poetically by crafting a personal and lyrical poetry that would transport them to an alternative universe immune from the corrupting forces of social reality.

#### *Beyond the „Yung-Vilne“ Magazine*

„Yung-Vilne“ was not held together by a shared ideological or aesthetic orientation but rather by commonalities in its members' generational, educational, economic and social experiences. As the first generation of writers for whom Yiddish writing – rather than Russian, Polish or German literature – constituted its primary literary frame of reference, „Yung-Vilne“ did not share the same anxiety's about the need to prove the legitimacy of Yiddish as an acceptable form of modern aesthetic expression. Their fraternity of youthful energy, bravado, encouragement, friendly competition, social engagement, and varied creative experimentation ultimately overshadowed their disagreements regarding the appropriate degree of radical political expression in their work or the desirability of local versus universal imagery.

„Yung-Vilne“'s final issue harnessed the group's newly established fame to call for broader contact among all young Yiddish writers in Poland:

„To All Young Yiddish Writers and Artists in Poland:

There are dozens of Yiddish writers and artists spread throughout the land. Despite extraordinarily difficult conditions, we manage to live and create. But

28 Baym shvel fun a tog [At the threshold of the day], in: Yung-Vilne 2 (1935), 62.

we barely know anything about one another. We have decided to call all young writers and artists to Vilna for a conference. What are its goals?

1. To organize a union of young writers and artists.
2. To publish a journal representative of our members.
3. To establish a publishing house.
4. To publish a volume in which all the participants who attend our conference will be represented.<sup>29</sup>

For all of the statement's programmatic idealism, „Yung-Vilne“'s imagined national community of young Yiddish writers never materialized. Polish-Jewish society was too impoverished, too internally fractured, and too besieged by the threatening challenges to Jewish life emerging from the domestic political climate and from Germany to throw its support behind such an ambitious cultural vision.

Moreover, the authorities were not interested in the internal tension between the magazine's political and aesthetic poles. They confiscated all three issues, a badge of honor for those who believed that it enhanced the social credentials of the group locally. For instance, the magazine's third and final issue of 1936 contained a poetic triptych by Leyzer Volf that rehearsed common motifs of leftist radicalism. The poem „Arbeter“ [Workers] called on workers „to lift your heads high“ and „wipe away world borders“. „1905“, written in honor of the thirtieth anniversary of the failed Russian revolution, commemorated those young radicals who went to their deaths singing the International. And in „Kalemandra redt“ [Kalamandra Speaks], he caricatured capitalist greed and brutality. This was more propaganda than poetry.

As a result of his position as the group's organizer Shmerke Kaczerginski was arrested and threatened with a six-month prison term. The Polish prosecutor cited specific lines from the journal as evidence of the group's seditious goals. An appeal was filed on Kaczerginski's behalf, and at the trial in the spring of 1937 „Yung-Vilne“'s defense lawyer, Pinhas Kon, argued that nowhere in the journal had any writer explicitly called for revolution in Poland itself. He challenged the government's right to engage in „literary criticism“, and demonstrated how the prosecutor had misread Volf's poetry for political ends. Kon suggested that the material in the magazine was equivalent to that which appeared regularly in publications of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) and the Jewish Labor Bund all over Poland. The trial was closely followed in Vilna because its outcome not only affected Kaczerginski's fate, but also indicated the degree to which the local Polish authorities would tolerate political dissent from the Yiddish press. After a substantial deliberation, the judge asserted that despite his distaste for the magazine's content he could not find any criminal intent in it. Kaczerginski was freed and the confiscated issues of „Yung-Vilne“ were released with the appropriate changes.

Despite this moral victory, the incident brought greater self-censorship in its wake. „Yung-Vilne“ was forced to re-evaluate whether the expense and risk in-

29 Yung-Vilne 3 (1936), inside front cover.

volved in its magazine's continued publication exceeded its benefit, especially since the authorities would certainly be closely monitoring future issues. The decision to abandon publication followed soon after the group's 1936. With several group members poised to release their own literary volumes, the decision was made to abandon publication. Individual success reduced the need for collective publication. Though short lived, the magazine had served its purpose of providing „Yung-Vilne“ with an address in Yiddish literature. Thereafter the group's collective identity would be asserted through other means. The end of its magazine marked a new stage in „Yung-Vilne“'s co-operative ventures. For instance, the majority of its writers were included in the „Almanac of the Yiddish Writers and Journalists Union in Vilna“ in 1938. The group's substantial representation in the union's twentieth anniversary volume confirmed the local literary establishment's recognition of „Yung-Vilne“ as a central player on the cultural scene. Grade's entry in the almanac summed the sense of the expectations foisted upon them in a poem that pointed to the claims of both the present and the past on the group:

A voice calls out to me, like rain-soaked earth: Be Active!  
The voice of worlds destroyed grinds in stony depths,  
As the wheels tearing after the locomotive  
I aspire to deeds through the confusion of ideas.

The precipice in the nightmare is deeper than in reality.  
More than once I have climbed out – and snatched into the valley again.  
O, it is difficult for me to stride as one with my generation,  
I must also raise up with me all prior generations.<sup>30</sup>

In pointing to the demands of art as reflection of reality and art as redemption from it, Grade summarized the contradictions and tensions at work in the group's collective aesthetic project.

30 Chaim Grade: Eynmol shoyt gezogt tsum leb'n: Yo! [Once Again Said to Life: Yes!], in: Almanakh fun yidishn literatn un zhurnalistsn farayn in vilne (1938), 70.

SUSANNE MARTEN-FINNIS

The Jewish Press in Vilna:  
*Traditions, Challenges, and Progress during the Inter-War Period*

*Prologue*

In the summer of 1928 the editors of the Vilna Yiddish monthly „Di yidishe velt“ called for new standards of Jewish journalism in order to improve the quality of the Jewish press.<sup>1</sup> The editors could reflect with pride on their journal and on Vilna’s journalistic tradition, in which the guiding principles of Jewish party journalism had been nurtured back in the 1890s, principles that were still influential. Yet they were dissatisfied, and in July 1928 they were moved to appeal for a „completely new type of journalism“ that meant a break away from those principles. They were proud of Vilna’s past as a centre of Jewish journalism, they said in their appeal, however, the time had come to create new standards for the Jewish press.

What was the background to this call for new standards for the Jewish press? What were they about? And what exactly were the standards that those editors needed to break away from? What were the challenges the Jewish press had to face, how did they impede or even facilitate its progress and set its direction? Why was 1928 a turning point? And what is so specific about the Jewish press? These are the questions I would like to address in this paper.<sup>2</sup>

I will, first of all, outline the characteristic features of the Jewish press that emerged in nineteenth century Vilna, then part of Imperial Russia, secondly I will review the challenges it had to face and thirdly I will chart its progress during the period between the wars.

*Traditions*

My questions apply to a wide geographical area, but I will confine myself to the case of Vilna, or Wilno, as it was called between the two World Wars. It is a fascinating city, which seems to have provoked strong reactions. „Wilno was Europe’s ‚other side of the tracks‘ and, within that area, one of the poorest of her borderlands“,

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1 M.W. [sic]: Yidishe prese, in: Di yidishe velt [a monthly journal for literature, criticism and art] 4 (July 1928), 477–480.

2 I have dealt with them in more depth in my book: Vilna as a Centre of the Modern Jewish Press, 1840–1928. Aspirations, Challenges, and Progress, Bern 2003



Abb. 1  
Zeitschrift „Khaliastre“, Warschau 1922.  
Umschlagbild von Władysław Weintraub



Abb 2  
Zeitschrift „Yung Vilné“, Nr. 1, Wilna 1934.  
Umschlagbild von Bentsye Mikhtom



Abb. 3  
Zeitschrift „Yung Vilné“, Nr. 2, Wilna 1935.  
Umschlagbild von Bentsye Mikhtom



Abb. 4  
Bentsye Mikhtom; Emblem von „Yung Vilné“