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Tsevorfene bleter: The Emergence of Yung Vilne

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IN the decade preceding the outbreak of the Second World War a group of young, unknown Yiddish poets, writers, and artists helped turn Vilna into the dominant Yiddish cultural centre in Poland. These young men and women, the majority of them from Vilna itself or its neighbouring towns, emerged at a moment when Jewish Vilna's culture was defined by its commitment to Yiddish culture and youth. Drawn together under the rubric Yung Vilne (Young Vilna, 1929–40), the group synthesized the aspirations of individual members for artistic experimentation and freedom of expression with a collective concern for the social, political, and cultural life of the city. In doing so, Yung Vilne earned the distinction of being both the last of the major Yiddish avant-garde movements in inter-war Poland, and the literary group most evocative of the pressures of time and place.

Yung Vilne included almost a dozen artistic personalities who relied on their association with the group for personal support, professional co-operation, and competitive fun.¹ Its members published widely in the leading local, national, and

I have drawn my title from Elkhonen Vogler's poem 'Tsevorfene bleter' ('Scattered Leaves'), published in *Yung vilne*, 2 (1935), 33. This chapter is an expanded version of a talk delivered to the Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, Mass., 19–21 Dec. 1998. It is my pleasure to acknowledge the generous assistance of the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University towards my doctoral research. My thanks to Ruth Wisse for her comments on an early draft of this chapter, and to Rachel Rubinstein for her suggestions.

¹ To my knowledge, Yung Vilne never compiled a list of all the formally accepted members of the group. From their printed letterhead, group photographs, and those individuals published in the *Yung vilne* journals, we know that the following young creative artists formed the group's membership in its period of greatest productivity, from 1934 onwards: the poets Chaim Grade, Elkhonen Vogler, Leyzer Wolf, Perets Miranski, Abraham Sutzkever, and Shimshon Kahan; the writers Moyshe Levin and Shmerke Kaczerginsky; and the artists Rafael Chvoles, Bentsie Mikhtom, and Rokhl Sutzkever. In addition, we may include several more associates of the group, such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, Shloyme Belis, Henekh Soloveytshik, Falk Halperin, and Sheyne Efron, who were close friends of those in Yung Vilne at one point or another, but did not remain involved with the group long enough to be included among its core membership. After the Second World War Leyzer Ran, the most prolific bibliographer of inter-war Vilna, compiled a list of the entire 'Yung Vilne generation' that includes dozens of young writers, poets, plastic artists, playwrights, actors, and musicians who made up the broad cultural life of Vilna during the 1930s.

international Yiddish newspapers and journals of the day, most regularly in their own journal *Yung vilne* (1934–6), the city's intellectual Yiddishist daily newspaper, the *Vilner tog*, Warsaw's *Literarische bleter*, and such leading American Yiddish literary periodicals as *Tsukunft*, *Zamlbikher*, and *Inzikh*. Many of its most active writers and poets published their first books as members of Yung Vilne.² The group regularly contributed materials to special literary collections celebrating Yiddish literature and culture in Vilna and across Poland; such efforts include the group's significant representation in the anniversary volume of the Union of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Vilna³ (which had only recently accepted the Yung Vilne writers as members), and Yung Vilne's joint publication with their young literary colleagues from Kaunas of a special literary collection on the eve of the Second World War, *Bleter 1940*. Yung Vilne members frequently read from their latest writings at collective literary evenings in Vilna, its neighbouring communities, and larger centres such as Warsaw and Łódź. The combination of Yung Vilne's public accessibility, its willingness to reach out to readers by addressing topical subjects in its writing, and its recognition in both Poland and abroad as an important new force of artistic innovation resulted in the group's emergence as a symbol of cultural confidence in a period of mounting political and physical uncertainty.

As its name suggests, Yung Vilne's aesthetic possibilities were determined by its presence in and relationship with the cultural and political life of Vilna. Although its members sought to assimilate artistically the legacy of their city—in terms of both its physical and social realities—into the ideals of progressive Jewish youth and modernist creativity, each poet, writer, or artist accomplished this in his distinctive way.⁴ Moreover, although the sense of place, moment, and generation provided the group with a unifying creative framework, it chose not to articulate a literary manifesto that might limit the artistic freedom of its members. In the introduction to the first issue of its journal in 1934 its goals were articulated in the vaguest and most concise of ways: 'Yung Vilne—a young artistic group—was founded five years ago. The goal was to gather together in one circle the young Vilna

² These include Elkhonen Vogler, *A bletl in vint* (1935) and *Tsvey beriozes baym trakt* (1939); Leyzer Wolf, *Evigingo* (1936), *Shvarise perl* (1939), and *Lirik un satire* (1940); Chaim Grade, *Y'o* (1937) and *Musernikes* (1939); Moyshe Levin, *Frling in keltershtub* (1937) and *A denkmol baym taykhl* (1937); and Abraham Sutzkever, *Lider* (1937) and *I aldiks* (1940).

³ M. Shalit (ed.), *Almanakh fun yidishn literatn un zhurnalistsn farayn in vilne* ('Almanac of the Union of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Vilna') (Vilna, 1938).

⁴ The critic Yosef Teper commented: 'Vilna, the city with the most original Yiddish cultural climate, has had a great influence on the work of the group. This is reflected in its motifs, through the group's synthesis of tradition and the present moment, or in its representation of our intersection with the cultures of the other nations living in our borders' ('Yung vilne', *Literarische bleter*, 26 (26 Feb. 1937), 134). By contrast, Mikhoel Natish complained about the lack of overt regional flavour in the group's first publication: 'We were presented with almost nothing . . . Not Vilna's special colour, not its manners, not its landscape, not its urban dynamic, all of which ought to have been bursting through its poets' ('"Yung vilne" un ir zamlhelft', *Literarische bleter*, 34 (24 Aug. 1934), 560).

poets and artists to create possibilities for self-development.⁵ This proved important in allowing Yung Vilne to absorb a broad temperamental mix of young talents who experimented loosely with a broad variety of genres, styles, and themes.

In addition to the group's artistic inclusiveness, Yung Vilne never officially committed itself collectively to any one political programme, a radical move in perhaps the most politicized Jewish moment of Jewish life in inter-war Poland. Nevertheless, many group members were politically leftist in both their writing and their communal activities. Much of this had to do with their common social origins. They were all products of the same generation, born between 1905 and 1913. All came from poor families, several were orphans, and many were forced to support their literary ambitions through manual labour. With the exception of Chaim Grade and Abraham Sutzkever, the group's members were educated in the city's newly established Yiddish secular school system, imbibing a rigorous intellectual diet of Yiddish and European culture. They were affected through the 1930s by mounting Polish antisemitism, the threat from Nazi Germany, and Jewish Vilna's increasing impoverishment. The promise of the Soviet Union across the border resulted in several early members leaving Vilna for the USSR, while others are known to have either joined the communist underground in Vilna,⁶ or harboured intense pro-communist sympathies. Others, suspicious of opportunities for the free development of Jewish life under Stalin and committed to the Jewish presence in the Polish territories, were drawn towards more moderate forms of socialism or the Free Land movement (Frayland bavegung), which sought to settle the Jewish masses in sparsely populated areas where they would be free to develop autonomously according to their own culture and religion.⁷

⁵ For those who looked forward to a bold statement of purpose from the new literary group, something that they had come to expect from their reading of earlier European and Yiddish literary movements, Yung Vilne proved a disappointment: 'Vu iz der programatischer artikl?' ('Where is the manifesto?') (Natish, *Literarische bleter*, 34 (24 Aug. 1934), 560).

⁶ The writer Henekh Soloveytschik was the earliest member of Yung Vilne to be drawn to the USSR, fleeing in the wave of illegal mass emigration of young people in 1932-3. Although Shmerke Kaczerginsky was the only member of Yung Vilne who was a confirmed active participant in the underground Communist Party of Poland, Yung Vilne's publications and activities were closely monitored by the Polish authorities because of their frequent revolutionary sympathies and allegedly inflammatory content. For instance, Chaim Grade's 'Welt in naytsn fir un draysik' ('The World in 1934'), which exhorted, 'Rise up, proletariat, like a phoenix | from blood, and dust, and resignation', caused the confiscation of *Yung vilne*, 2 (1935). The poem was pulled and the journal was reissued with Grade's 'Yekhezkel' ('Ezekiel') in its place.

⁷ Leyzer Wolf and Abraham Sutzkever were friends of Michael Astour (Tshernikhov), one of the young founders of the Free Land League in Vilna. Astour contends that Sutzkever participated in meetings of the Free Land movement from the mid-1930s, though perhaps more for its social opportunities than out of firm ideological convictions. In 1938 Wolf became actively involved, going so far as to run for the local city elections on the Free Land ticket in 1939. At an open symposium of the Free Land movement in Jan. 1939 he explained: 'At first I was a cosmopolitan. But later, after immersing myself in the cultural problems of nations, I came to the conclusion that each people must live normally in its own culture. And one's free culture can only exist and develop when a people is geographically concentrated

In what proved to be the exception to the rule, young Abraham Sutzkever, who emerged in the mid-1930s as Yung Vilne's model of poised poetic refinement in an age of political turmoil, found his initial application for membership in Yung Vilne rejected in 1932 because his nature lyrics seemed irrelevant to the social needs of the moment.⁸ Despite this brief moment of ideological exclusivity, Yung Vilne remained committed to artistic and political inclusiveness. Even in later years, as group members gained confidence and recognition, it resisted the pressure to articulate a manifesto outlining a shared artistic or ideological programme. Instead, the group attempted to break down regional and programmatic barriers, as in this public statement of 1936:

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 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.⁹

Although this effort to foster a sense of national Polish Yiddish literary comradeship among young authors did not materialize owing to financial constraints, the very idea suggests that Yung Vilne saw itself more as a literary-artistic fraternity designed to foster creative competition and mutual support than as a cohesive literary movement.¹⁰

and free of foreign influences' (see Leyzer Ran's introduction in L. Wolf, *Lider* ('Poems') (New York, 1955), 18). For a history of the Free Land movement, see Mikhoel Astour, *Geshikhte fun der fraylandlige un funem territorialistishn gedank* ('History of the Free Land Movement and of the Territorialist Idea') (New York, 1967).

⁸ There was no such concept as 'art for art's sake' in the minds of Yung Vilne's idealistic members at this early stage. Shmerke Kaczerginsky explains: 'To us, nature was only a narrow footpath in our writing. But to Sutzkever, the natural element was a broad highway, which we looked at with fear. Why should we be interested in the green of the earth and the blue of the skies when greyness and darkness were all around us? . . . We did not understand him' (*Shmerke Kaczerginsky ondenk-bukh* ('Memorial Volume in Honour of Shmerke Kaczerginsky') (Buenos Aires, 1955), 308-9).

⁹ *Yung vilne*, 3 (1936), inside front cover.

¹⁰ Although the conference never materialized, Yung Vilne did attempt to synthesize some of the stated goals in its own activities. For instance, although it did not establish its own publishing house, it did lend financial support to several of its members, who then published works under the rubric of Yung Vilne. Moreover, it was a custom for Yung Vilne to organize a public literary evening whenever one of its members published a major work or new book. As for efforts to establish links with other young poets, Yung Vilne's relationship with a group of writers from Kaunas in the late 1930s resulted in their joint publication of *Bleter 1940* ('Pages 1940') and several joint public appearances.

THE NAME 'YUNG VILNE'

Vilna's most respected Yiddish daily, the *Vilner tog*, headlined its special Friday edition of 11 October 1929 with the title: 'Der araynmarsh fun yung vilne in der yidisher literatur' ('Yung Vilne's March into Yiddish Literature'). In an unsigned introduction the paper's editor, Zalmen Reyzin, proclaimed:

With today's issue, especially dedicated to the work of our young Yiddish writers in Vilna, many of whom have never before appeared in print, our newspaper fulfils its duty to our young vanguard by allowing them to appear in public before an eager audience. Vilna would not be Vilna if its soil did not produce any literary offspring. Let us hope that we will derive much pride from these young literati, whom we introduce to our readers today. Then the *Vilner tog* will have the privilege of having been the guide and helper in the development of young Yiddish poetry in the Jerusalem of Lithuania.¹¹

Such was the influence of a weekend edition of the *Vilner tog* that overnight the very concept of a young Vilna and the names of its literary newcomers were the talk of the town. While Zalmen Reyzin's patronage of young talent served to put their names on the literary map, the emergence of a 'Yung Vilne' would also serve to bolster the efforts of the established secular Yiddish intelligentsia to claim Vilna as the world capital of Yiddish.¹² In contrast to increasingly Polonized elements of the Jewish intelligentsia in Warsaw and Kraków, Vilna's intellectuals and leaders promoted Yiddish as the language of a distinct and unified Jewish civil society.¹³ The presence of a young, native literary group became a crucial new element in the city's already impressive network of Yiddish social, educational, religious, and cultural institutions. Vilna's leadership and people alike could pride themselves on belonging to the most active Yiddish cultural centre in inter-war Poland.¹⁴ Despite Warsaw's sheer weight of numbers as the most important Jewish centre in eastern

¹¹ 'Der araynmarsh fun yung vilne in der yidisher literatur', *Vilner tog*, 11 Oct. 1929, 4. For a reprint of the entire section devoted to Yung Vilne, see *Di goldene keyt* ('The Golden Chain'), 101 (1980), 66-76.

¹² In choosing a name for the group it is clear that Reyzin must have had in mind such late 19th-cent. groups as Young Germany, Young Scandinavia, and especially Young Poland. Reyzin's decision to coin a derivative of these for the new group was designed to evoke echoes of similar national creativity among Yiddish-speaking Jews, while embedding a local geographic element in the group's name so as to draw attention to the influence of Vilna. In any case, Reyzin could not have chosen 'Yung Yidish' as the name for the group since it had already been used as the title for the first post-war modernist Yiddish journal published in Poland (Łódź, 1919).

¹³ In response to the German occupation of Vilna during the First World War Vilna's Jewish leadership rallied behind Yiddish as part of their effort to demonstrate the distinctiveness of the Jewish community and forward a claim for national recognition and rights. Because of the discrimination against the Polish majority in Vilna, the assimilatory pull there was much less strong than in other Polish centres.

¹⁴ See the classic summary of Yiddish culture in this period by Arcadius Kahan, 'Vilna: The Sociocultural Anatomy of a Jewish Community in Interwar Poland', in his *Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History*, ed. R. Weiss (Chicago, 1986).

Europe, Vilna sought to assert its leadership through both the quality and the breadth of its Yiddish cultural life.

The aspiring young writers received valuable encouragement from the city's Jewish cultural leadership. Moyshe Kulbak, then perhaps the most popular living Yiddish poet in Europe, was a teacher at the Yiddish *Gymnasium* and the Yiddish teachers' seminary. It is impossible to read memoirs from this period without coming across the influence of Kulbak on an entire generation of aspiring writers. In his memoirs of a trip to Vilna in 1928, David Lazer recalls how his encounter with Moyshe Kulbak came to represent for him, an outsider, Vilna's cultural atmosphere:

We were a large group of young people, boys and girls, out for a walk one Sabbath morning with Moyshe Kulbak at the head . . . Kulbak presided over everyone like a *rebbe* over his followers. The mood was light, everyone was involved in a lively conversation, one young man began to sing from the [Vilna] choir's repertoire. Suddenly, we heard a few words in Polish—from one of the girls in our group. Kulbak became very serious and admonished us with words and in a tone that I remember to this day. 'I beg you children,' he said, 'for God's sake do not speak Polish now. There are non-Jews all around and I am ashamed!' And why do these few words remain with me still? Because I, a kid from Kraków, was accustomed to the exact opposite. In Kraków respectable Jews, Jews with a national consciousness, were embarrassed to speak Yiddish when a non-Jewish acquaintance passed them in the street. I remember an incident in which an established Zionist and Jewish activist was in the middle of a conversation with a friend in Yiddish while out on a walk. He was suddenly frightened when he noticed a non-Jewish acquaintance with whom he conducted business approaching in the distance. He turned to his friend: 'I beg of you, here comes a non-Jewish acquaintance of mine and I am ashamed to speak Yiddish in front of him. Let us switch over to Polish.' That was the difference between Kraków and Vilna. And that was Moyshe Kulbak.¹⁵

Kulbak's passionate, forward-looking refrain about 'the bronzed youth' from his revolutionary poem 'Di shtot' ('The City', 1919) still resonated as a generational clarion call in Vilna.¹⁶ His distinct style of declamation and his poetic manner energized students with a love of Yiddish literature, and transformed the figure of the Yiddish poet into a community icon. Most importantly, Kulbak's ode to Vilna, published (ironically enough) in Warsaw's *Varshever shriftn* in 1927, demonstrated how place could become a metaphor for the way of life of its inhabitants, and how

¹⁵ D. Lazer, 'Mit Moyshe Kulbak in Vilne' ('With Moyshe Kulbak in Vilna'), *Di goldene keyt*, 77 (1972), 36-7.

¹⁶ Kulbak's 'Di shtot' bore witness both to the literature of revolution in Yiddish and to the revolution in Yiddish writing that took place in light of the events of the First World War and its aftermath. The poem galvanized readers, particularly youth, in its expression of the excitement of being part of such monumental times: 'Un bronzene yungn | bafaln iz demolt a viln | tsu shtiln | der tsorn | fun yorn | vos zaynen farlorn. | Un s'hobn di gleker geklungen! | Hey, lomir geyn! Lomir geyn! | Lomir do iberlozn di shvakhe' ('And a will has overcome | bronzed youth | to still | the anger | of the years | that were lost. | And the bells tolled! | Hey, let's go! Let's go! | Let's leave behind the weak') (M. Kulbak, *Oysgekliebene shriftn* ('Selected Works') (Buenos Aires, 1976), 78-91).

Vilna, in particular, embodied the richness of a modern Jewish culture that drew on a complicated past.¹⁷ Kulbak, more than anyone else, legitimized the imagining and reading of home as text.

While Kulbak was hammering home the uniqueness of Vilna in verse, Max Weinreich, director of YIVO (the Jewish Scientific Institute) and the city's foremost Yiddish linguist, founded a non-partisan Yiddishist scouting organization, Bin. Its oath—'I swear to serve Jewish culture, I swear to help those around me'—was but another example of how the city's cultural leadership sought to instil an ethos of collective social action and cultural confidence in the next generation.¹⁸ Present and future members of Yung Vilne such as Leyzer Wolf and Abraham Sutzkever were early members of Bin, participating in its outings into the countryside and attending its summer camps. This opportunity to leave behind their urban lives and to celebrate both the local environment and Jewish culture in Yiddish with other young people was a valuable lesson in the importance of *landkentenish*—knowing one's physical and cultural landscape.¹⁹ The attention bestowed upon young people by such leading local figures as Moyshe Kulbak, Max Weinreich, and Zalmen Reyzin signalled to young people that respect for language, lineage, and place were the defining elements of Jewish Vilna.

Although they never rejected the name with which Zalmen Reyzin introduced them in the pages of the *Vilner tog*, Yung Vilne's 'march into Yiddish literature' was more a literary fiction orchestrated by the establishment than a generational invasion. Early member Moyshe Levin recalls that though few of the group's initial participants were enthusiastic about the appellation Yung Vilne, they were not yet sure enough of their own artistic direction to replace it with some original concept of their own.²⁰ By the time group members began to attract attention on their own in the early 1930s, the identification 'Yung Vilne' was already a familiar and attractive invitation to readers searching for local flavour or literary innovation from one of Europe's most traditionally creative centres. Whether or not Yung Vilne initially appreciated the localism embedded in its name, Vilna—with its network of Yiddish schools, youth and sports clubs, five daily Yiddish newspapers, publishing houses, and YIVO—advertised the quality of the young writers even before they proved it.

What distinguished Yung Vilne most from fellow Yiddish avant-garde groupings of the inter-war period was the encouragement and organizational support it got from the local establishment. This was very much in contrast to the young

¹⁷ M. Kulbak, 'Vilne', *Geklibene verk* ('Collected Works') (New York, 1953). Nathan Halper's translation of the poem is included in I. Howe, R. Wisse, and C. Shmeruk (eds.), *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York, 1987).

¹⁸ For a brief history of Bin, see L. Ran, *Bin: Di geshikhte fun a stam kinder organizatsye* ('Bec: The History of a Youth Movement') (Vilna, 1934).

¹⁹ For examples of how such ideas about *landkentenish* were formalized in Poland, see D. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington, Ind., 1999), 54–5.

²⁰ M. Levin, '10 yor yung vilne' ('Ten Years of Young Vilna'), *Literarische bleter* (26 Feb. 1937), 136.

avant-garde Yiddish cultural movements in Poland in the immediate post-war period, revolving around such publications as *Yung yidish*, *Ringin*, *Khalyastre*, and *Albatros*.²¹ These earlier aesthetic Yiddish circles in Poland presented themselves as literary-artistic orphans determined to bring entirely new modes of expression to Yiddish literature. 'We, the Genesis-makers,' begins one such declaration published in *Yung yidish* in 1919, 'we are on guard . . .'. Such groups were among the first in Yiddish to combine effectively the work of plastic artists and writers into attractive, avant-garde publications, a pattern that Yung Vilne would later adopt. But as the following programmatic statement from *Yung yidish* reveals, they were also openly seduced by their reading of European, Russian, and American cultural modernism: 'In our turn towards impressionism, expressionism, cubism, we will combine all the perspectives with the name futurism.'²² Such expressions of belated kinship with currents in Western art and writing were deliberate reactions against the legacy of Peretsian folkism and naturalism which they perceived as the dominant but tired styles at work in Polish Yiddish writing.

To Yung Vilne, however, mottoes such as 'We, the young, a happy, boisterous gang off on unknown roads' (adopted by the *Khalyastre* circle from a poem published in *Yung yidish* by Moshe Broderson) smacked of unrefined defiance and rootlessness. If resistance to, or rebellion against, the reigning literary culture were the very conditions of existence for earlier Yiddish modernist circles in Poland, a very different dynamic was at work in Yung Vilne. In agreeing to appear together first in an organ as established as the *Vilner tog* under a name chosen by one of the community's most respected literary figures, the group conceded that it would not necessarily seek to make its name by claiming to be the new vanguard of Yiddish literary culture. Most significantly, whereas the Yiddish literary circles of the preceding decade had emerged at a moment when the politics of revolution and the art of rebellion could galvanize young writers, by the late 1920s and especially into the 1930s this post-war revolutionary mood of idealism had been tempered by renewed political uncertainty and doubts about the promise of the revolution, whether in politics or in art.

If earlier Polish Yiddish modernist groups had set out, at their moment of origin, to revolutionize Yiddish literature, their artistic innovativeness often had a price. Their individual members' drive for radical poetic experimentation often alienated audiences to such an extent that they proved unable to sustain a local readership. Their thirst for vibrant artistic communities that were aesthetically in step with the latest trends in Europe or America meant that many of their members lost interest in their lives in places like Warsaw or Łódź, which, when compared with Berlin, Paris, London, or New York, seemed like parochial backwaters. With the exception of the Inzikhistn (Introspectivists) in America, no Yiddish modernist group managed to

²¹ *Yung yidish* (Łódź, 1919); *Ringin* (Warsaw, 1921–2); *Khalyastre* (Warsaw, 1922–Paris, 1924); *Albatros* (Berlin, 1922–Warsaw, 1923).

²² *Yung yidish*, 2–3 (1919), n.p.

sustain a *collective* existence over any significant length of time.²³ The key to Yung Vilne's longevity was to lie in its moderation. In attempting to synthesize both aspects of its name—the condition and creativity of youth with the cultural inheritance of place—it rejected poetic rebellion as its artistic *raison d'être*. Consequently, the group was able to enter into dialogue with both Yiddish and Western literary traditions, which prompted audiences to recognize Yung Vilne as a force for both cultural continuity and generational creativity.

EARLY ORGANIZATION

Although Yung Vilne's public launching dates from Zalmen Reyzin's formal introduction of the group and the publication of their poetry in the *Vilner tog* of October 1929, the opportunity for an unofficial gathering of aspiring literary and artistic talents had presented itself several years earlier. The event that led to the founding of a creative group for young people was a local art exhibition in 1927, 'Fun shulhoif biz glezer gas' ('From the Synagogue Courtyard to Glazier's Street'). A group of young Vilna writers and artists encouraged exhibitors to submit works that best represented the range of the Jewish cultural landscape in Vilna. The show attempted to bring together representations of the crooked, narrow alleys and archways that were the symbolic heart of traditional Jewish life in Vilna, with more modern, industrial representations of Jewish life. In contrasting depictions of the old shulhoif (the synagogue courtyard which included the fabled Gaon of Vilna's study, a multitude of smaller prayer houses divided by sect or guild, and one of the best Jewish libraries in eastern Europe) with representations of Vilna's secular working class, the exhibition presented a holistic portrait of Vilna as a community that prided itself on both its tradition and its modernity. The artist Bentsie Mikhtom, one of Yung Vilne's earliest and most long-term members, took a cue from the exhibition in his subsequent design of the group's emblem. It depicts one of Vilna's winding, cobbled streets with two archways that were the familiar symbol of the traditional 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 having as its central image a symbol of youth and growth emerging from the archways of the Jewish ghetto, Mikhtom signalled the rootedness of Yung Vilne in the environment from which it emerged.²⁴

²³ See A. T. Alt, 'Ambivalence toward Modernism: The Yiddish Avant-Garde and its Manifestos', *Yiddish*, 8/1 (1991), 52–61; and S. Wolitz, 'Between Folk and Freedom: The Failure of the Yiddish Modernist Movement in Poland', *Yiddish*, 8/1 (1991), 26–51.

²⁴ Mikhtom's designs for the first two covers of *Yung vilne* (1934, 1935) show a similar effort to reflect the origins and direction of the group in a concise image. The cover of the first issue is dominated by a sun rising from behind a brick wall, a set of smoking chimneys, and abstract skyscrapers designed to evoke industrial urbanism. The bottom left of the page portrays a crooked alley and series

Inspired by the success of the art exhibition and by the public's enthusiastic response to Vilna as an evocative subject for artistic treatment, the young writers Shloyme Belis and Shimshon Kahan sought to establish regular gatherings of authors, artists, and musicians and to create a permanent nurturing, creative environment for young talent. Despite the encouragement of Zalmen Reyzin and the advice of Falk Halperin, an older, published local poet, the idea was only partly successful. Initially, it proved more difficult than expected to find a core group of young writers interested in such an artistic fraternity. Instead of the anticipated eclectic gang of painters, plastic artists, musicians, poets, and prose-writers, what emerged was a much more modest collection of several writers and even fewer artists. The early gatherings were unpretentious, often held over tea and cakes in the family kitchens of such early members as Belis, Kahan, and Mikhtom. Although these gatherings allowed members to read their poetry, display their art, and debate artistic and ideological issues of common interest, no natural leader emerged between 1927 and 1929 to help pave the way for the group's further growth and recognition. This was due both to a lack of real poetic and prose talent among most of the group's early members, and to its transitional membership. Of its earliest participants—figures such as the student-poet Avrom Yehoshua (later Abraham Joshua Heschel), Arn Pyudik, Leyb Stotski, Yehiel Shtern, Moyshe Basin, Shloyme Belis, and the prose-writer Henekh Soloveytshik—none was still a member by the time the group published its first journal in 1934.²⁵ Most importantly, of those individuals who would go on to assume the organizational and aesthetic leadership of the group through the period of its greatest productivity—Shmerke Kaczerginsky, Leyzer Wolf, Chaim Grade, and Abraham Sutzkever—none was a founding member of Yung Vilne.

of archways symbolic of Jewish Vilna. The name of the group in large, square letters appears at the top. This artistic combination of a recognizable local Jewish particularism and an abstract, universal modernity is a gesture towards the cultural, chronological, and literary worlds into which Yung Vilne imagined itself. The rising sun represents the group's self-conscious youth and its predilection for a political utopianism that might, one day, come to outshine both their grey, impoverished, modern urban present, and their traditional Jewish past. The cover of the second volume is dominated by a stylized human figure, drawn with sharp angles. Its arm and head are raised towards the heavens, symbolic both of youthful striving and of a revolutionary impulse. The figure's feet, however, are firmly planted in a row of crooked homes and cobblestones scattered along the bottom part of the page that might evoke the Jewish homes and courtyards of Vilna. The name of the group curves around the top-right part of the cover in a sweeping bow. The top part of the Yiddish letter *lamedh* in the word 'Vilne' is elongated, forming a dramatic counterpoint to the raised arm of the human figure. Both words and lines on the page are combined to form a single image of progressive youth rooted in a familiar urban geography.

²⁵ For the most comprehensive memoir of the early days of Yung Vilne, see S. Belis, 'Bay di onheybn fun yung-vilne' ('Regarding the Origins of Young Vilna'), *Di goldene keyt*, 101 (1980), 11-65.

'THE NIGHT IS BROWN LIKE PUSHKIN'S FACE':²⁶
A DEFINING VOICE

In June 1930 a young poet in Vilna set out to break the world record for poetry writing. By the end of the month he had composed 1,001 untitled poems at a rate of more than thirty a day. One such lyric went:

Un din vi a zaydene kleyd
iz mayn libe tsu dir,
un klor,
vi tsvey mol tsvey iz fir.
Nor nit klor, vi a narisher vits,
iz dayn libe tsu mir,
un nit praktish, vi hering papir
in a gevelbl fun grits.
(And delicate as a silken gown
is my love for you,
and clear,
as two times two is four.
But unclear as a foolish joke
is your love for me,
and impractical
like wrapping-paper for herring
in a shop selling grits.)

The poem's unexpected yoking together of seemingly incompatible elements—unrequited love and the uselessness of wrapping-paper for fish in a cereal shop—became a trademark of Yung Vilne's first true star, the impudent Leyzer Wolf. Though his desire to break a world record in poetry writing seemed strange, even aesthetically irresponsible, to his literary colleagues in Yung Vilne, its very achievement had a profound effect. For here was one of their own, asserting that a Vilna boy writing in Yiddish could mount a (mock) challenge to that standard of world literature *A Thousand and One (Arabian) Nights* with a Yiddish equivalent of 1,001 poetic fantasies. Such literary presumption served a useful purpose in the early development of a literary movement. For although fellow Yung Vilne poet Elkhonen Vogler at the very same moment was producing highly sophisticated verse about his native Lithuanian landscape under the influence of European symbolism, Vogler's experimental nature poems could never appeal to a mass audience in the same way. Wolf's earthy images seemed a more familiar, accessible part of the tradition of Yiddish satire and folk language, even when they were startlingly new. It proved to be his whimsical lyrics, grotesque parodies, and trenchant political criticism that first drew and then sustained public interest in the work of the group, and

²⁶ The first line of Leyzer Wolf's parodic crime lyric 'A mord' ('A Murder'), *Inzikh*, 20 (1936), 46.

created anticipation every time Yung Vilne announced it was to stage a local reading. At one such event he delivered deadpan a mock-nostalgic love lyric, even as the audience howled in their seats: 'The night is white as a banana, | the shadows are sweet as tarts; | where are you my dear Mariana? | The goats are singing sweetly in the garden.'²⁷ On another occasion Yung Vilne sought to publicize its forthcoming collective public reading by publishing one of Wolf's mock-philosophical lyrics, 'Farvos' ('Why'), with a promise of more for all those who attended:

Farvos bilt a hunt af der levone?—
 Vayl er meynt: S'iz a royt shtikl fleysh.
 Farvos shlogt a melamed di kinder?—
 Vayl zey kenen nit keyn alef-beys.
 Farvos faln arop di shtern?—
 Vayl s'iz zey umetik mit got.
 Farvos hakt men oys di velder?—
 Di khayes zoln kumen in shtot.
 (Why does a dog bark at the moon?
 Because he thinks it is a red piece of meat.
 Why does a teacher beat his pupils?
 Because they do not know the alphabet.
 Why do the stars fall?
 Because it is gloomy being alone with God.
 Why does man chop down forests?
 So that the beasts may invade the town.)²⁸

If Leyzer Wolf marched—as Zalmen Reyzin would have us believe—along with the other members of Yung Vilne into Yiddish literature with a confident voice, then it was certainly a conscious act of literary self-invention. Biographical sketches and his own memoir of childhood (submitted to the first YIVO autobiography competition for youth in 1932) paint a strikingly different picture of the poet, born Leyzer Mekler in 1910.²⁹ Mekler grew up in a working-class family in the Vilna suburb of Shnipeshek, across the River Vilye from the traditional Jewish quarter. He was a sickly, shy child, for whom, as he writes, 'communal life was burdensome'. He avoided company as a student at his Leyzer Gurvitsh Yiddish folk school, retreating instead into an imaginary world where 'my best friends were books'.³⁰ Too weak and nervous to hold down a regular job, he spent most of his days helping his sister sew the fingers on leather gloves in their apartment, reading Yiddish and world literature in the Strashun library, and writing. Mekler's choice of poetic pseudonyms—which were to include Leyzer Wolf, Bestye Kurazh (Beast

²⁷ A. Sutzkever, 'Leyzer Volf: A bintl zikhroynes vegn a yung-farshnitnem poet fun yung vilne' ('Leyzer Wolf: A Few Recollections about a Poet from Young Vilna Cut down Prematurely'), *Di goldene keyt*, 26 (1956), 45. The poem was subsequently published in *Yung vilne*, 2 (1935), 63.

²⁸ *Vider a kurts* ('Again Something Brief') (Vilna, 17 Feb. 1934), 3.

²⁹ L. Wolf, 'Otobyografye' ('Autobiography'), in id., *Lider*.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 37.

of Courage), and Herts Nakht (Heart of the Night)—indicates just how aggressively he willed a voice of poetic assuredness. Despite his own admission that he shunned communal life, evidence suggests that this reserved personality thrived as a leader when provided with the opportunity. When a doctor suggested that his weak disposition might benefit from physical activity, he joined the local football club in Shnipeshok, Hanasher, and became one of its leading scorers. Moreover, as a frequent presence in the activities of Bin, Wolf brought younger boys into the organization, foremost among them his neighbour the future Yung Vilne poet Abraham Sutzkever. Far from being a lonely, shy presence, Wolf went from penning lyrics to a popular anthem sung by Bin members during their walking excursions through the local countryside³¹ to helping stage an internal uprising in 1931 against Bin's leader, Max Weinreich, demanding that the organization embrace a more openly socialist ideology.

Wolf first attracted the attention of the young writers and artists who had begun gathering in 1927 when the *Vilner tog* published two of his sentimental grotesques in 1928. By this term I mean poems that sought a strange fusion of poetic moods, one in which the writer's language and descriptions shocked and amused, while still evoking a certain amount of compassion for the poem's subject. In his 'Di bulvanske moyd' ('The Coarse Old Maid') and 'Vilner shulhoyf' ('The Vilna Synagogue Courtyard') he wove together exaggerated, even mocking descriptions of characters and the urban landscape of Vilna with moments of deep feeling. 'Di bulvanske moyd', for instance, opens with a startling self-description by its female speaker:

Punkt vi in a balagole boyd
leb ikh—di grine, bulvanske moyd
alt gebakt fun soldatskn broyt.

Af der geler terkisher mashin
ney ikh, shtep ikh, fun bagin
biz der ovnt blutikt afn shpin.

Bay a shvartsn shtinkndikn knoyt
fres ikh broyt mit kroyt, mit burik-royt
fartrinkndik mit biter zalts a loyt.

(Exactly as if it were in a shed or pen
I live—a mouldy-green and coarse old maid,
a crusty bit of soldier's bread, baked God knows when.

I sit at my yellow Turkish machine—and thread,
sew, stitch and unstitch, from the first crack of dawn
till evening bleeds upon my spindle; then,

³¹ 'Tif in vald baym fayer | yunge binen zingen | fun a velt a nayer | un di funken shpringen. | Hey, hey, voyl di binen | voyl iz zey un gut | velder hobn zey in zinen | blumen-zaft in blut' ('Deep in the forest around the fire, | young Bees sing | about a new world | as sparks explode. | Hey, hey, happy are they, | happy and enjoying themselves, | with forests on their mind | and flower nectar in their blood') ('Tif in vald baym fayer', in *Binishe lider* ('Bee Songs') (Vilna, 1932), 38–9).

beside a black and suffocating wick
I gulp my cabbage, red beets, and dry bread
and take a dose of salts to wash them down.)³²

These opening triplets, tightly constructed and rife with internal rhyme, introduce the monologue of a simple-minded woman whom society has left behind. Its speaker is confined to a life of poverty and monotonous manual labour. She presents herself in terms as coarse as her appearance. By her own admission, she is green and stale—like an old piece of soldier's bread. Rather than simply eating her meagre daily ration, she uses the more animalistic term *fresn* ('devour'). The repeated use of sounds such as 'ay' and 'oy', alongside a highly regulated, predictable metre, correspond to her personal experience of suffering and boredom. Yet, unable to recognize her own undesirability, the speaker holds fast to the dream that one day 'a true love from a good family, silken and flaxen' will come to carry her away from her misery. As she cries repulsive 'broyne leber-trern' ('brown-as-liver tears'), Wolf's readers are at once delighted and discomfited by the unexpected images. The baseness of his speaker's language and self-description draws attention simultaneously to the economic deprivation of Jewish Vilna and to the universal phenomenon of human longing. Abraham Sutzkever suggests that Wolf did not just invent the subject of his poem, but drew on his personal observations of an unattractive, unmarried seamstress who lived in his building. When she read his poem in the *Vilner tog*, she was convinced that the young poet was announcing his devotion to her, and was despondent when she discovered that she was only the stuff of his poetic fantasy.³³ The reader's encounter with this coarse old maid introduced the marginalized, suffering, lonely individual as an integral part of the local people-scape that had too often been overlooked in literature about Vilna owing to the community's proud self-image as the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania'. Wolf punctured this aestheticized cultural élitism by demonstrating the extent to which material exigency debased the community's religious aura.

Wolf employed the same technique of the sentimental grotesque in his 'Vilner shulhoyf'.³⁴ In choosing as his subject the Gaon's courtyard—long the symbolic and communal heart of Jewish Vilna—he was staking a territorial claim to his corner of Jewish eastern Europe, even as he sought to deflate the myth of Vilna that Moyshe Kulbak's ode to the city had recently rekindled. If, just two years earlier, Kulbak could serenade Vilna as a 'dark cameo set in Lithuania' whose 'every stone was a book, parchment every wall', then to Leyzer Wolf it was the habitation of lunatics, beggars, and hungry wives with infected, running noses. Kulbak, who had lived in post-war Berlin prior to returning to Vilna, experienced his reintroduction to Jewish communal life in Vilna as a dark Eden of holistic culture and muted spiritual beauty. But Vilna represented the entirety and limitation of Wolf's

³² Trans. Robert Friend, *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1988), 620–2.

³³ Sutzkever, 'Leyzer Wolf', 44.

³⁴ Wolf, *Lider*, 133–6.

personal experience. His synagogue is filled with apocalyptic visions such as a painting in one of the small study houses depicting the end of days; a portrait of Moses Montefiore hangs *above* one of the Gaon, a not-so-subtle indication that despite the myth of Vilna as a centre of traditional Jewish learning, what really mattered to its inhabitants was their material well-being. Whereas Kulbak's speaker unites his very self with his subject in a dramatic, concluding outburst, 'I am the city', Wolf's poem ends with solitary, unsettling images: 'the dreamy kabbalist still ponders there, the last remaining hasid dances alone in his prayer house'. His anti-romanticism was designed to refocus local readers on the importance of engaging with the moment, rather than living in an apolitical, heady relationship with the myth of a past spiritual glory. In reflecting the current mood of political, material, and spiritual insecurity, Wolf offered up an alternative perspective of Vilna that directly contradicted the inflated one presented to them by Kulbak.

Wolf thus invited the writers of Yung Vilne to treat their native city and its inhabitants as open, malleable artistic subjects while resisting the temptation to mythologize. The literary critic Max Erik was one of the first to proclaim the teenage writer's talents. At a lecture in the Vilna *Realgymnasium* in 1928, Erik read and reread these two poems to his students, analysing their language, satire, and new images, proclaiming that the young writer might just become Vilna's equivalent to American Yiddish poet Moshe Leib Halpern, then among the most popular Yiddish poets in Poland.³⁵ Wolf's early poetic successes established a privileged position for poetry over prose within the artistic hierarchy of Yung Vilne, proving the poetic medium popular among audiences and amenable to both serious and light-hearted experimentation. A few years later he became the first member of Yung Vilne to win recognition in international Yiddish literary circles when Abraham Liesin agreed to publish several of his poems in *Tsukunft*.³⁶ This opened the first important avenue of co-operation between established American Yiddish writers and editors in New York and Yung Vilne's emerging talents, one that reached its fruition in the mid-1930s when Abraham Sutzkever became a regular contributor to *Inzikh*.³⁷ Although *Inzikh* published several poems by Wolf and

³⁵ Sutzkever, 'Leyzer Wolf', 36.

³⁶ Wolf wrote to Liesin in 1931 asking him to consider his poems for publication. His poetry first appeared in *Tsukunft* in June 1933, a publishing relationship that was maintained until 1939. Liesin's support for the young writer was a crucial factor in his development as a poet, since the local critical reception of Wolf was not universally positive. Itzik Manger, for one, was put off by the young man's bombast. In commenting on one of Wolf's mock love lyrics, which included such lines as 'I love you, I hope you come to a quick end | I love you, may a fire consume you', Manger wrote: 'These are the high point of Leyzer Wolf's love diatribe, and instead of being published in the *Vilner tog*, this poetic schoolboy ought to be dragged back to school by the ear. This newspaper is making room for vulgarity which is certainly not poetry . . .' (I. Manger, 'Der vilner petrarke' ('The Petrarch of Vilna'), in *Getseylte verter* ('A Few Words') (Kraków, 30 May 1930), 4).

³⁷ Wolf was not the only member of Yung Vilne included in *Tsukunft* during the 1930s. Liesin later published the writing of Shimshon Kahan, Elkhonen Vogler, Chaim Grade, Moyshe Levin, and Abraham Sutzkever.

Grade in its pages between 1934 and 1936, its editors, Arn Glants Leyeles and Jacob Glatstein, were most attracted to the poetry of Sutzkever, whom they published twenty times between 1935 and 1940. Glatstein later commented: 'Wolf sent many things to *Inzikh* but he was still in a transitional period. He sent us raw experimental poems which we could not publish. It is quite strange that as early as 1933 Liesin recognized Wolf's talent. Liesin was not known for his poetic taste. How he came to the modernist Leyzer Wolf remains a profound riddle.'³⁸ The approbation of such esteemed editors as Liesin, Arn Glants Leyeles, and Joseph Opatoshu of *Zamlbikher* greatly boosted the group's prestige in its native land.

Wolf's 'Napoleon' was granted a place of honour in Yung Vilne's official inauguration in the *Vilner tog* of 1929:

Di erdvelt muz tsu mir gehern
 vi heysn dort di zilberdike gliveres in himl? Shtern?—
 zayt eydes, shtern: di erdvelt muz tsu mir gehern!
 Un ale kinign, melokhim un keysarim zog ikh on
 ikh, Na-po-le-on:
 tsu mir gehert der erdvelt tron!
 (The earthworld must belong to me
 What are those silver glimmers in heaven called? Stars?
 Bear witness, stars: the earthworld must belong to me!
 And I hereby warn all kings, rulers, and emperors
 I, Na-po-le-on:
 The earthworld throne belongs to me!)³⁹

These opening lines by the 19-year-old poet are as impudent as they are startling. Taking on all reigning sovereigns, the speaker proclaims his primacy over the universe. He pretends that he does not even know what the glowing objects in the heavens are called, and therein cavalierly disposes of the transcendent universe. The stars are useful to him only in so far as they are witnesses to his complete mastery over the earthly world below. Later in the poem he refuses even to recognize God, declaring: 'You are not of my disposition!' The desire to write in the voice of Napoleon functions as a way for Leyzer Wolf to (over)compensate for the narrowness of his own environment and parochial experience, and imagine himself a writer in command of the European experience. Yet in deciding to use this poem as his formal introduction as a member of Yung Vilne, he leaves it open to be read as parodic self-portrait. For while it may be written in the voice of Napoleon, it is also a strange type of poetic self-assertion in which a barely published writer vaults onto a literary throne, prematurely anticipating his displacement of all reigning poetic voices with his own arrogant bombast. Moreover, in dismissing both the heavens and God—symbols that point towards the more refined, transcendent possibilities

³⁸ J. Glatstein, 'In tokh genumen', *Idisher kempfer*, 16 Nov. 1956, 12-13.

³⁹ Repr. in *Di goldene keyt*, 101 (1980), 68.

of art—in favour of his own dominion over ‘the earthworld’, Wolf’s speaker affirms a preference for an aesthetic of grit, earthiness, and direct confrontation with reality. Such efforts to appropriate the personae of the most esteemed figures of European history were to prove more than just acts of youthful presumption. In having them speak Yiddish, Wolf at one and the same time parodied the parochial nature of Yiddish in the larger European context *and* staked a claim for his language as one which was able to take in and possess the entire universe.

Over the course of his career Wolf appropriated the voices or artistic styles of several of the leading figures of the Western intellectual and artistic tradition, from Leonardo da Vinci, Beethoven, and Byron, to Goethe, Heine, and Longfellow.⁴⁰ His 1935 poem ‘Di vebn’ (‘The Weavers’) is among his most serious in this vein in its ability to model itself in both form and content after Heine’s similarly titled poem of almost a century earlier. Whereas Heine’s lyric protest, part of his poetic series *Zeitgedichte* (‘Poems of the Times’), was occasioned by a brutal Prussian crackdown on a revolt by starving Silesian weavers, Wolf invokes Heine to rally his readers against the German threat in his own time.⁴¹

Mir arbetn unter der erd, in der shvarts,
 mir vebn di fone di royte vi harts,
 mir kernfn, mir kumen, mir lebn!
 Mir vebn di nets farn broynem vampir,
 Alt-daytshland—mir vebn takhrikhim far dir,
 Mir vebn, mir vebn!
 (We work underground, in secret,
 We weave the flag, red as a heart,
 We fight, we are coming, we live!
 We are weaving the net for the brown vampire,
 Old Germany—we are weaving death shrouds for you,
 We weave, we weave!)⁴²

Such efforts to update and Yiddishize well-known motifs of world literature demonstrated that Yiddish poetry could absorb all forms, rhythms, and content, even as it addressed immediate political or social concerns. Wolf’s 1936 poem *Evigingo*, published in the Latin alphabet and modelled on Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, was the most radical of his experiments in naturalizing foreign modes of writing

⁴⁰ For instance, see ‘Bayron’ (‘Byron’, 1932), ‘Nitshe’ (‘Nietzsche’, 1932), ‘Goethe’s toyt’ (‘Goethe’s Death’, 1932), ‘Beytoven’ (‘Beethoven’, 1932), ‘Leonardo da vintshi’ (‘Leonardo da Vinci’, 1933), ‘Bayron un keyn’ (‘Byron and Cain’, 1934), ‘Daytshishe folkslider’ (‘German Folksongs’, 1934), ‘Hayne un goete’ (‘Heine and Goethe’, 1936), ‘Eyropeishe sonetn’ (‘European Sonnets’, 1936), ‘Pushkin’ (1937), ‘Sergey yesenin’ (‘Sergei [Aleksandrovich] Esenin’, 1937), ‘Mefisto redt’ (‘Mephisto Speaks’, 1937), and ‘Buda’ (‘Buddha’, 1937). Several of these are published in Wolf, *Lider*.

⁴¹ The final stanza of Heine’s ‘The Weavers’ reads: ‘The shuttle flies in the cracking loom | And night and day we weave your doom | Old Germany, listen, ere we disperse | We weave your shroud with a triple curse | We weave! We are weaving’ (L. Untermeyer, *Heinrich Heine: Paradox and Poet (The Poems)* (New York, 1937), 318).

⁴² *Yung vime*, 2 (1935), 64.

into Yiddish verse.⁴³ His epic follows the quest of a solitary, ageing hero to rekindle his taste for life when he realizes that, without an heir, his life is meaningless. He goes off in pursuit of the restorative powers of the elusive Evigingo, a trek that takes him from the centres of Western culture to the Soviet Union. But when the promise of progressive Soviet science is revealed as a sham, the poem concludes with his realization that no ideology or social system, no matter what its promise, can magically satisfy man's thirst for companionship. Although the poem's thematic exoticism, often impenetrable symbolism, and Latinized Yiddish alphabet prevented it from becoming a popular success, its musical and linguistic inspiration from Wolf's reading of *Hiawatha* showed a writer willing to push the limits of where Yiddish could be made to go.⁴⁴

If Leyzer Wolf was interested in bringing home literary influences from the European and American sphere that he encountered in his reading, he was equally interested in joining the Yiddish literary tradition. He often adapted the style of popular Yiddish writers while modernizing their subject so as to address contemporary social concerns. One example of this is his reworking of Sholem Aleichem's *Tevey the Dairyman* in 1935, in which he imitates the comic mistranslations of liturgical material readers had come to expect from Tevey.⁴⁵ 'Ashrey ha-ish', comments Wolf's Tevey, 'vos hot a shtiler vayb baym tish' ('Happy is the man who has a quiet wife at the table'). The familiar framing scenario of Tevey confessing his troubles with his children to Sholem Aleichem is also preserved. Yet, having outlived his wife, Golde, and watched his daughters grow up, Wolf's Tevey emerges remarried, bemoaning a new set of troubles. This time it is the behaviour of his teenage son Leybke that proves most challenging. A passionate revolutionary, Leybke is worrying his father sick with his increasingly bold activities. The son proves a talker equal to his father, giving voice—as did his fictional elder stepsisters—to continuing ruptures within Jewish society caused by ideological gaps between the generations. Whereas Tevey's daughters in Sholem Aleichem's version repeatedly insist to their father that he cannot possibly understand their challenges to Jewish tradition, Wolf's parent-child relationship is confronted with a more threatening communicative gap:

'My son,' I say to him, 'have pity on your old father, stop playing with fire. Are not your parents dear to you?'

⁴³ L. Wolf, *Evigingo* (Vilna, 1936). Wolf self-published this poem at great personal expense, as the play on the name of its publisher, Gerangl ('Struggle'), indicates. It was a diminutive, sixteen-page book, printed on thin newsprint and bound in a thick, pink cover. Wolf was disappointed when it failed to attract any critical interest.

⁴⁴ A transliteration of *Evigingo* into Yiddish script can be found in *Chulyot: Journal of Yiddish Research*, 3 (Spring 1996), 209–19. It is doubtful that Wolf read *Hiawatha* in the original. His likely source was Yehoash's translation of Longfellow's epic into Yiddish in 1910.

⁴⁵ L. Wolf, 'Tevey der milkhiker: Naye monologn', Abraham Sutzkever Archive, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, no. 100, Leyzer Wolf file.

'Parents are a good thing,' he says, and then thinks some more. 'But even more important than parents are the peasants who toil for seventeen hours a day for only a piece of bread.'

'But you are still only a child! . . . I ought to take you and teach you a lesson!'

'Father,' he answers with a deep breath, 'you are still living with old ideas. If you hit me, I would hit you back!'

With the generational repartee suddenly shifting from the more tender father-daughter relationships in Sholem Aleichem's source-text to a possible physical confrontation between father and son, violence inside the family threatens to bring down one of Yiddish literature's most beloved heroes once and for all. Most incredibly, it is not the contemporary threats from the anti-Jewish Polish right or Nazi Germany that Wolf chooses to highlight as Tevye's greatest challenge. Rather, the threat lies within a Jewish community so politically disunited that meaningful dialogue has grown almost impossible. And, just as his Tevye had foreseen, when his Leybke is arrested for revolutionary activities, the authorities do not limit their punishment to the young perpetrator alone. Tevye awakes the next morning to find his two dairy cows slaughtered. Wolf's free-verse episode ends with Tevye on the run once again, terrified by the warning. As Leybke is carted away in chains, Tevye—one of Yiddish literature's most active talkers—finds himself silenced once and for all: '“Father,” he cried out to me, “have courage!” But I had nothing else left to say.'

A similar tendency was at work when Leyzer Wolf introduced a new exchange of letters based on Sholem Aleichem's epistolary classic about Menachem Mendl and Sheyne Sheyndl.⁴⁶ In Wolf's version, however, Menachem Mendl eventually writes home to his wife from a collective in Soviet-controlled Birobidzhan—a strange place indeed for this character who had, until then, most represented capitalist fantasy in Yiddish literature. Such reworkings of familiar voices and texts from the Yiddish literary tradition, updated to reference contemporary ideological rifts, political options, or simply new experiments in the construction of the poet's literary persona, were central components of his aesthetic of sophisticated folkishness. In updating Tevye and Menachem Mendl for a new generation of readers, Wolf asserted the right of Yiddish authors to express themselves from within the contours of recognized literary tradition even as they transgressed it. Wolf's willingness to engage with, challenge, and parody inherited texts and characters from Yiddish culture assured his young colleagues in Yung Vilne that they need not be embarrassed by their fate as Yiddish writers. He demonstrated that their use of familiar Yiddish literary texts, the town of Vilna, or the Jews' immediate social and political concerns as material for their writing would not necessarily make it more

⁴⁶ Wolf intended to publish his 'Menakhem Mendl un Sheyne Sheyndl' and 'Menakhem Mendl in birobidzhan' in book form as *Der nayer menakhem mendl* ('The New Menachem Mendl'). The book never appeared. Portions of the episodes were published in the *Vilner tog*, 14 Feb. 1936, and in *Yungvald*, 3 (Mar. 1939), 1-4.

parochial but, in fact, more recognizable to Yiddish readers everywhere.⁴⁷ Wolf was the standard-bearer in Yung Vilne for both poetic localism and universality.

Abraham Novershtern has asserted that, in their hunger to avoid the 'parochial' label, Yung Vilne shunned literature that focused on internal Jewish debates.⁴⁸ The examples I have cited suggest a more complicated reality. Wolf was clearly torn between the socialist outlook of some of his colleagues, and a Jewish national politics. In 1930, for instance, he attempted to work through his own confusion in a long poetic political drama, 'Yidnland' ('A State for the Jews'). Taking a leaf out of both Herzl's nationalist fantasies and Y. L. Perets's late apocalyptic dramas, Wolf's 'Yidnland' is more a performance of contradictory ideas than a political manifesto. It opens on Passover, a symbolic festival of deliverance, with a group of Jewish visionaries gathered on a verdant island in the middle of the ocean to force the creation of a free Jewish land. The language of their proclamation of independence, secured by a volunteer army and unified sense of purpose, is designed to promote the gathering in of the exiles:

A declaration to all the radio stations of the world, to the Jewish people the world over: Let it be known: an entirely new Jewish land was born today in the middle of the ocean with the help of a new Jewish Messiah! A Jewish land as big and as wide as it is plentiful, a land blessed with the most beautiful miracles of nature! A Jewish land whose bosom is prepared to welcome all the world's Jews . . . You thought that you would be forced for all eternity to remain entangled and suffocating in a spiral of Jewish blood. Jews! Listen to the call of the moment! Come from the farthest corners of the world . . . to the new, free land of the Jews.⁴⁹

Yet against such promise Wolf includes voices which spurn efforts at Jewish power and self-sufficiency. Elijah the Prophet echoes traditional Judaism's suspicion of forcing the hand of the Messiah by refusing to bless the new Jewish homeland, warning 'nit in koyekh ligt di geule | nor in libe' ('salvation lies not in power | but in love'). Most interesting is the appearance of a character referred to as the *golus gayst* ('spirit of Jewish exile'). Playing on the concluding lines of Perets's apocalyptic drama *Baym nakht afn ultn mark*, in which a jester cryptically calls out, 'Yidn, in shul arayn' ('Jews, back to the synagogue'), the warning of Wolf's *golus gayst* seems a jest in itself: 'Yidn, in golus arayn. Golus tatsil memaves!' ('Jews, back to exile. Exile will save you from death!').

⁴⁷ Other examples of this include his 'Mendele, Peretz, un Sholem Aleikhem' ('Mendele, Perets, and Sholem Aleikhem', 1929), 'Reb Mendele' (1935), 'Mendele montazh' ('Mendele Montage', 1936), 'Ayzik meir dik un di almone rom' ('Isaac Meir Dik and the Widow Rom', 1937), 'Montefiore in vilne' (1938), 'Der vilner goen un der besht' ('The Vilna Gaon and the Ba'al Shem Tov', 1938), 'Vilne' (1940), and 'Lite' ('Lithuania', 1940).

⁴⁸ A. Novershtern, 'Yung Vilne: The Political Dimension of Literature', in Y. Gutman, E. Mendelsohn, J. Reinharz, and C. Shmeruk (eds.), *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars* (Hanover, NH, 1989).

⁴⁹ L. Wolf, 'Yidnland', MS, Abraham Sutzkever Archive, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, no. 43, Leyzer Wolf file.

Ultimately, Wolf's poetic drama proves at odds with any specific political end. Although the depiction of a foiled attempt to establish an independent Jewish state in an exotic land might strike some as outwardly anti-Zionist and equally suspicious of territorialist attempts to relocate the Jews, Wolf's parodic ending leaves this unclear. The warning of the *golus gayst* is funny in that it is a deadly serious parody of the Jewish collective uncertainty over national self-determination. Wolf raises the possibility of territorial and political self-sufficiency as a solution to the very real situation of Jewish poverty and the first signs of a brewing anti-Jewish storm in Poland and Germany, only to have it scuttled by a voice asserting that Jewish strength lies in continued dispersion and powerlessness. The drama shows itself highly sceptical about the seriousness of Jewish national transplantation even as it ridicules those who favour the status quo. Far from disengaging from internal Jewish political debates, Wolf's 1930 drama legitimized Yung Vilne's artistic consideration of Jewish political questions from the group's earliest years.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

In 1939 Leyzer Wolf founded Yung Vald (Young Forest), a literary group for the next generation of aspiring poets and writers in Vilna.⁶¹ With Yung Vilne's earliest, defining voice now acting as a literary mentor to this newest collection of literary hopefuls, Yung Vilne signalled its shift from the youngest and last of the major Yiddish literary movements in inter-war Poland to one which had earned an international reputation for literary authority. In my description of the origins of Yung Vilne, and of Wolf's role in preparing the broadest of creative spaces for the new movement, I have attempted to show how both involved acts of wilful self-invention. Just as Wolf—a reclusive young man by nature—found an assertive cultural voice through his poetics of parody, so too did Yung Vilne, a group artificially established (or at least midwived) by the local establishment, emerge as a choir of

⁶⁰ Throughout the 1930s Wolf continued to write poetry and prose that considered the Jewish political situation in eastern Europe. These include his indictments of European culture in his several poetic fantasies of Nazi leaders and their visits to Jewish centres in Poland such as 'Hitler, gobels, un gering' ('Hitler, Goebbels, and Goering', 1933), 'Fashistn' ('Fascists', 1934), 'Goebbels in varshe' ('Goebbels in Warsaw', 1934), 'Briv fun fridrikh nitshe tsu adolf hitler' ('Letter from Friedrich Nietzsche to Adolf Hitler', 1935), 'Goering in poyln' ('Goering in Poland', 1935), and his posthumously published collection regarding the Nazi era, *Di broyne bestye* ('The Brown Beast') (Moscow, 1943). In 1939 the Vilna journal *Yung-vald* (no. 4) published an announcement about a forthcoming novel by Leyzer Wolf, *Mizrekh un mariv* ('East and West'). The promise was for a novel portraying the options for independent Jewish cultural life in three states: Soviet Birobidzhan, Palestine, and a territorialist free land. The novel was never published and the manuscript disappeared with the majority of Wolf's personal literary archive. It is unknown whether he took it with him when he fled to the Soviet Union in 1940. Wolf remained a refugee in the USSR and died of typhus or malnutrition sometime in 1943.

⁶¹ The group published four issues of *Yung-vald* in Vilna between Jan. and Apr. 1939. Its members included the young poet Hirsh Glik, who would later go on to pen the most famous partisan hymn of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.

complementary literary and artistic voices most evocative of the pressures and cultural ferment of its time. Whereas more avant-garde Yiddish literary movements in the inter-war period are remembered for the modernist reach of their work, Yung Vilne—under Wolf's early direction—showed how the intersection of community and individual creativity could precipitate a more organic relationship between writer and environment that would allow both the literary aesthete and the common reader to enjoy literature together.