



Vilna My Vilna

STORIES BY ABRAHAM KARPINOWITZ

Translated from the Yiddish by Helen Mintz

Foreword by Justin Cammy

Other titles in Judaic Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art

Bridging the Divide: The Selected Poems of Hava Pinhas-Cohen
Sharon Hart-Green, ed. and trans.

Early Yiddish Epic
Jerold C. Frakes, ed. and trans.

Letters to America: Selected Poems of Reuven Ben-Yosef
Michael Weingrad, ed. and trans.

My Blue Piano
Else Lasker-Schüler; Brooks Haxton, trans.

Rhetoric and Nation: The Formation of Hebrew National Culture, 1880–1990
Shai P. Ginsburg

Social Concern and Left Politics in Jewish American Art: 1880–1940
Matthew Baigell

The Travels of Benjamin Zuskin
Ala Zuskin Perelman

Yiddish Poetry and the Tuberculosis Sanatorium: 1900–1970
Ernest B. Gilman

Vilna My Vilna



STORIES BY
ABRAHAM KARPINOWITZ

Translated from the Yiddish by
Helen Mintz
Foreword by Justin Cammy



Syracuse University Press

Foreword

Jewish intellectuals and writers have written about Vilna since the origins of modern Yiddish literature. If the historical shtetl was appropriated by the generation of classic writers who emerged in the mid- to late nineteenth century as the mythopoetic center of a new literature in need of its own native ground, for the writers that followed, the Jewish city was the setting from which to symbolically stage the confrontation between Jewishness and Europeanness, tradition and secularization, and to engage the challenges of class stratification, urbanization, the new politics of the Jewish street, and the competing languages of contemporary Jewish experience.

This volume of stories by Abraham Karpinowitz (1913–2004; Avrom Karpinovitsh in Yiddish) situates its narratives of interwar Jewish life in the author's hometown of Vilna, with special attention to extraordinary characters from among the city's ordinary street people. They are in conversation with a long tradition of Jewish writing about Vilna that sought to construct, challenge, interpret, and redefine a specific cultural myth of Jewish urban space. Insofar as Karpinowitz found his literary voice only after Vilna's destruction, he also must be read within the broader context of Holocaust literature, specifically within the subcanon of Yiddish texts that spoke to a global readership that had suddenly lost its Yiddish-speaking heartland. One senses that Karpinowitz approached his writing as a sacred duty, in which the personalities he encountered as a young man were reanimated to resist the finality of their destruction. Their vibrant presence and life impulse is Karpinowitz's preferred mode of post-Holocaust witnessing. While Abraham Sutzkever and Chaim Grade, the most famous of Vilna's young Yiddish writers to survive the war, honed a high-brow literary aesthetic in their postwar engagement with their hometown,

Karpinowitz found his talents best suited to a popular idiom. Vilna's Yiddish-speaking alleys, brothels, taverns, and street corners would find their voice in him.

Given that Abraham Karpinowitz departed Vilna in 1937, drawn as a twenty-four-year-old to Stalin's Jewish autonomous region in Birobidzhan, and then spent the war years in the Soviet Union, his confrontation with the completeness of his community's destruction upon his brief return to Vilna in 1944 was all the more shocking. He had not lived through the final years of Polish rule, when the struggle for Jewish rights against nationalist xenophobia reached its peak, nor the city's occupation under the Soviets when Jewish political and cultural expression was severely curtailed, nor its liquidation under the Nazis. His imagination remained frozen in the heyday of Vilna's cultural dynamism. Soon after arriving in the new state of Israel from a Cypriot Displaced Persons camp in 1949, he joined the short-lived Yiddish literary group Yung-Yisroel (Young Israel). For the next three decades, in his spare time as manager of the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, his literary attentions would alternate between stories of Vilna and tales of life in Israel. Writing allowed him to navigate the distance between an organic Yiddish-speaking world *dortn* (over there) and the new politico-cultural landscapes of the Hebrew-speaking state in which Yiddish was permitted to exist publicly only on the margins. With this in mind, it is no coincidence that Karpinowitz's first story in *Di goldene keyt*, the flagship journal of Yiddish literature and culture in Israel, was titled "Never Forget."¹

1. Avrom Karpinovitsh, "Farges nit," *Di goldene keyt* 7 (1951): 174–79. The story appeared in a section dedicated to "young Yiddish literature in Israel," a group of recently arrived writers who, under the encouragement of *Di goldene keyt's* editor Abraham Sutzkever, formed the nucleus of the Yiddish literary group Yung-Yisroel in the 1950s. The story was reprinted as the opening selection in Karpinowitz's first book, *Der veg keyn Sdom* (The Road to Sodom, 1959), a volume focused on the years of Israel's founding. In this story, a young man who escaped the slaughters in the ghetto is now an Israeli soldier whose conscience is haunted by the final Yiddish words of his mother when he comes face-to-face with his enemy: "Never Forget!" The story perfectly situates the competing imaginative claims on Karpinowitz that would define the remainder of his career as his prose alternated between

Vilna, Real and Imagined

Vilna, known affectionately as the Jerusalem of Lithuania, cultivated a myth of place in which layer upon layer of historical experience added to the city's reputation as harbinger of the most important trends in Eastern European Jewish culture. Indeed, no other Jewish city in Eastern Europe maintained a level of attachment from its natives, expatriates, and visitors that compelled them to so lovingly advertise its achievements. To be fair, until the twentieth century, there were not many big Jewish cities in Eastern Europe that could rival Vilna's religious and cultural pedigree. For all of Warsaw's new demographic strength and Lodz's industrial power, they lacked the deep tradition of which there was a surfeit in Vilna, which was already known as a city of sages in the seventeenth century. Vilna's reputation was sealed through the towering rabbinic scholarship of its most famous resident, Elijah ben Solomon Zalmen, the Vilna Gaon (1720–1797). The Gaon's example set Vilna's standard for intellectualism, diligence, creative reinterpretation, and openness to worldly knowledge. By the nineteenth century, the city was home to many leading intellectuals, *maskilim*, proponents of the Jewish enlightenment, and also a center of Hebrew and Yiddish publishing. Both Yehuda Leib Gordon and Avraham Mapu, respectively the most important poet and novelist of the rebirth of modern Hebrew literature, were residents of the city. Later, Vilna was a staging ground for the development of Jewish political awakening. Not only was it the birthplace of the socialist Bund (the General Jewish Worker's Union) in 1897, but it hosted early circles of Hovevei Zion (the Lovers of Zion) and was the organizational base for Mizrahi, the most important early Zionist religious party. By 1902, Vilna could also boast its own radical martyr in the person of Hirsh Lekert, punished for an attempt to kill Vilna's tsarist governor. The city continued to break new ground in the realm of the competition of ideas by hosting *Literarische monatshriftn* (Literary Monthly), the first Yiddish scholarly journal. When Vilna (now

Vilna and contemporary Israeli settings. As coeditor of the 1967 *Almanac of Yiddish Writers in Israel*, he remained committed to the cultural imperative of Yiddish writing in Israel and to Yiddish literature's integration of Israeli realities into its imaginative universe.

Wilno) was incorporated into the new Polish state following World War I, its standing as a center of popular and scholarly Yiddishism was confirmed by the decision to headquarter there the Yiddish Scientific Institute (Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut, or YIVO), the most advanced center for scholarship on the history and culture of Ashkenazic Jewry. Vilna's civic pride, rooted in a respect for tradition and for the city's pioneering spirit, inspired its intellectuals and writers to rally behind the concept of *nusekh Vilne*, the Vilna way. As Max Weinreich, the director of YIVO proudly proclaimed, "In Vilna there are no ruins, because aside from its traditions Vilna has a second virtue: momentum. It is a city of activism, of pioneering."² Or, in the words of a popular folk saying that distinguished between material and cultural security, "Go to Lodz for work, to Vilna for wisdom."

A great deal of the city's creative energy emerged from a specific cultural geography that allowed Jewish writers to map their desires into a reading of its urban space. Of course, it is important to remember that Vilna was not an imagined city but in fact several competing imagined cities, each claimed by a different national group. To the Poles it was Wilno, where Catholic pilgrims flocked to see the famous virgin in the Ostra Brama church and whose central hill was punctuated by three crosses. Its spiritual capital for Poles was magnified by the words of hometown poet Adam Mickiewicz, whose Romantic epic *Pan Tadeusz* claimed the city and its surrounding lands as native ground: "O Lithuania, my country, thou art like good health. I never knew till now how precious you were, till I lost you." For Lithuanians, the city was Vilnius, where one of their own princes built his fortress on a local hill as the city's founding act, the ruins of which remained one of its defining sites. Though the Jews could not boast ownership over its cathedral or churches, its fortress or hilltops, their geographic center was marked by the crooked lanes and distinctive archways of the traditional Jewish quarter, where streets were referred to by the city's Jews according to their Yiddish names, many in memory

2. Max Weinreich, "Der yidisher visnshaftlekher institut," in *Vilne: A zamlbukh gevindmet der shtot Vilne*, ed. Yefim Yeshurin (New York: [n.p.], 1935), 323, 325.

of local personalities. At its center was the *shulhojf*, a courtyard complex that boasted the Great Synagogue, many smaller prayer houses (including that of the Gaon), several communal institutions, a public bathhouse and old well, and a clock marking the time for prayer. The *shulhojf's* more traditional spaces later competed with those that attempted to bridge the divide between observant and modern Jews, such as the Strashun Library, bequeathed by a local benefactor in the late nineteenth century, whose reading room became a neutral, shared space for Jewish scholars and writers of all religious and political stripes. By the interwar period, the area was also a hangout for local toughs, actors, and writers, many of whom congregated in bohemian spaces like Fania Lewando's vegetarian restaurant and the neighboring Velfke's café. If the traditional Jewish quarter was the symbolic heart of the community, by the twentieth century it existed as only one axis in Vilna's expanding geocultural matrix. Others included Pohulanke, a newer, well-heeled neighborhood with broad boulevards and tree-lined streets that attracted the city's intellectuals and many of its newer communal institutions. The YIVO building, the Maccabi playing fields, the Jewish Health Protection Society, the library of the Society for the Promotion of Culture, and several modern Jewish schools were among the many institutions that were built there, beyond the tangled streets of the traditional Jewish quarter, to represent the contemporaneity of Jewish life in Vilna. Across the city's iconic Viliye River was the hardscrabble neighborhood of Shnipishok, where many working-class Jews resided, including several of those who would go on to form the nucleus of the literary and artistic group Yung-Vilne (Young Vilna) in the 1930s. Karpinowitz's boyhood and early twenties was lived within this Jewish matrix where past and present, traditional and secular Jews, workers and intellectuals, a Jewish underworld and burgeoning middle class, Yiddishists and Hebraists, Zionists, socialists, Territorialists, and Jewish communists argued the world and contributed to Vilna's dynamic expression of Jewish popular and high culture. Since neither the city's Polish nor Lithuanian residents constituted a majority of Vilna's population, the linguistic and cultural assimilation that significantly affected Jews in other Eastern European cities was mitigated for Vilna's Jewish population, allowing them to rally around their own languages and culture.

By the interwar period, *musekh Vilne's* self-promotion as both a defender and producer of contemporary Jewish culture was continuously deployed to distinguish the city from its biggest competitors. From the perspective of Vilna's Yiddishists, the future of Eastern European Jewry rested upon several pillars of which their city was a prime example: pride in the Yiddish language and its distinct culture as evidence of the Jews' status as a nation; a commitment to *yiddishkeit* as the manifestation of Jewish secular humanism; a sense of civic pride and ownership over a traditional past in which the Gaon could be claimed as a folk hero by even secular Jews; and a firm sense of *do-ism* (here-ness) that envisioned a Jewish future in situ, in the Eastern European heartland of Jewish life, rather than elsewhere. Vilna served as the citadel of this modern conception of Jewish nationhood.

The number of modern histories and anthologies designed to assert Vilna's reputation suggest that the age of nationalism created a need among Eastern European Jews for a capital of an imagined Yiddishland as a way to press their own distinctiveness as a people. Pride of place drove Vilna's admirers to advertise and celebrate its centrality. While it was still under the control of the tsars, these included the enlightenment writer S. Y. Fuenn's *Kiryah ne-emanah* (The Loyal City, 1860) and Hebraist Hillel Steinschneider's *Ir vilnah* (The City of Vilna, 1900). The community's travails during World War I, when it was briefly occupied by Germany, inspired Tsemakh Shabad and Moyshe Shalit's *Vilner zamlbukh* (Vilna Anthology, 1916, 1918), Khaykl Lunski's *Fun Vilner geto: geshtaltn un bilder geshribn in shvere tsaytn* (From the Vilna Ghetto: Portraits from Challenging Times, 1918), Zalmen Reyzin's *Pinkes far der geshikhte fun Vilne in di yorn fun milkhome un okupatsye* (Chronicles the History of Vilna in the Years of War and Occupation, 1922), and Jacob Wygodski's *In shturem: Zikhtroynes fun di okupatsye-tsaytn* (Eye of the Storm: Memoirs of Occupation, 1926). These volumes shaped a local, popular historiography during a period of dissolution to assist in reconstruction and the preservation of collective memory. Efforts to promote the city's reputation in the interwar period were taken up by Morits Grosman's *Yidische Vilne in vort un bild* (Jewish Vilna in Word and Image, 1925), Israel Klausner's *Toldot ha-kehilah ha-ivrit be-Vilnah* (History of the Jewish Community of Vilna, 1938), A. Y. Grodzenski's *Vilner almanakh* (Vilna Almanac,

1939), and Zalmen Szyk's *1000 yor Vilne* (One Thousand Years of Vilna, 1939), the last the most detailed Yiddish guidebook ever produced of a Polish-Jewish city. Even those who left Vilna behind claimed the city as an important *lieu de memoire*, as when Yefim Yeshurin published *Vilne: A zamlbukh gevidmet der shtot Vilne* (Vilna: An Anthology Dedicated to the City) in New York in 1935.³ Local patriotism manufactured the need to export an image of the city in which the richness and diversity of Jewish culture nurtured, sustained, and inspired its population. This might explain the tension between YIVO director Max Weinreich's desire during the 1930s to promote Vilna as possessing "genius of place"⁴ and American Jewish historian Lucy Dawidowicz's admission many years later that her exposure to the city's contradictions "shattered my sentimental notions about the viability of the realm of Yiddish."⁵ Of course, after World War II, the impulse to memorialize Jewish Vilna took on new urgency for its former residents. We see this not only in the immediate postwar effort to publish memoirs of the city's last days but most impressively in the work of Leyzer Ran, whose three-volume *Yerushalayim d'Lite* (Jerusalem of Lithuania, 1968–1974) attempted to reconstruct the full cultural milieu of interwar Jewish Vilna through the careful collection and reproduction of photographs and documents. Karpinowitz's literary engagement with Vilna after the war is indebted to this historical and anthological imagination that produced an image of Vilna as model Jewish urban space.

3. For more on the history of chronicling Vilna, see Anne Lipphardt, "'Vilne, Vilne unzer heymshot . . .': Imagining Jewish Vilna in New York," in *Jüdische Kultur(en) im Neuen Europa: Wilna 1918–1939*, ed. Marina Dmitrieva and Heidemarie Petersen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004), 85–97. The list above does not include Israel Cohen's *Vilna* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1943), which appeared in New York while the city was under occupation, and those works by witnesses to and refugees from the Holocaust that explore the fate of the city in its final years. See, for instance, the diaries of Herman Kruk and Yitskhok Rudashevski, and memoirs by Mark Dworzecki, Shmerke Kaczerginski, and Abraham Sutzkever.

4. Weinreich, "Der yidisher visnshaftlekher institut," 323.

5. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time: A Memoir, 1938–1947* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 144. Dawidowicz spent the academic year 1938–1939 under Weinreich's tutelage as part of YIVO's *aspirantur* (graduate fellows) program.

Vilna in Yiddish Literature⁶

Surprisingly, it was not until after the destruction of Vilna Jewry that the city became a significant theme or locale in Yiddish prose writing. Though Isaac Meir Dik, one of the nineteenth century's most popular Yiddish writers made his home in Vilna and drew on its environment for his maskilic narratives, the city had no novelist who did for it what Sholem Asch or I. J. Singer accomplished for Warsaw or Lodz in the first decades of the twentieth century. Instead, Vilna's literary image was constructed in poetry, which can be divided into three general stages: (1) the poetic romanticizing of Vilna as utopian space, a process that began during World War I and continued through the interwar period; (2) the period of counter-myth dominated by the Yung-Vilne generation of writers in the 1930s; and (3) the lamentation and epic poetry emerging from the Holocaust and its immediate aftermath. Each of these contributed to Abraham Karpinowitz's creative inheritance and situated him within an established tradition that, only after the war, would expand significantly into prose where he would join such fiction writers as Chaim Grade, Joseph Buloff, and Ber Halpern⁷ in contributing to the fourth stage of Yiddish writing

6. For more on the representation of Vilna in modern Yiddish literature, see Avrom Novershtern, "Yung-Vilne: The Political Dimension of Literature," in *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars*, ed. Yisrael Gutman, Jehuda Reinharz and Chone Shmeruk (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1989), 383–98; Novershtern, "Shir halel, shir kina: Dimuya shel Vilnah be-shirat yidish bein shtei milhamot ha'olam," in *MeVilnah LeYerushalayim: Mehkarim betoldoteihem u'betarbutam shel yehudei mizrah eiropo*, ed. David Asaf, Israel Bartal, Avner Holtzman (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002), 485–511; Justin Cammy, "Tsevorfene bleter: The Emergence of Yung-Vilne," in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 14, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001), 170–91 and Cammy, "The Politics of Home, the Culture of Place: 'Yung Vilne': A Journal of Literature and Art (1934–1936)," *Judische Kultur(en) im Neuen Europa: Wilna 1918–1939*, 117–33. Yiddish readers in search of an anthology of writing about Vilna should consult *Vilne in der yidisher literatur* (Vilna in Yiddish Literature), vol. 84 of the series Masterworks of Yiddish Literature, ed. Shmuel Rozhanski (Buenos Aires: YIVO in Argentina, 1980).

7. See, for instance, Chaim Grade, *Der names shabosim* (translated as *My Mother's Sabbath Days*), *Der shulhoif* (translated as *The Well*), *Di agune* (translated as *The Agunah*), *Froyen fun geto* (*Women of the Ghetto*), *Beys harov* (*The Rabbi's House*), *Di kloyz un di gas* (translated as

about Vilna: the construction of thick landscapes of memory that offered detailed prose narratives of prewar Jewish life.

The first attempts at the poetic mythologizing of Vilna begin in World War I and extend through the early 1930s. This period witnessed the publication of several dozen poems that were interested in the ways in which Vilna's urban landscape could be read and interpreted as a cultural text, and thereby contribute to the imperative of *landkentenish* (knowledge and possession of place). Yiddish writing was harnessed to perform the Jews' at-homeness in Poland by demonstrating the degree to which they were an integral part of its built and human landscapes. These early images of Vilna in Jewish poetry tended towards naïve odes to the city, often composed by expatriates or admirers. They often served as textual guides to the city for nonnatives, providing a visual panorama of its major sites. A. Y. Goldschmidt's "To Vilna" (1921) is an early example of the sentimental strain that dominated Yiddish writing about the city in this period, one that emphasized harmony between the city's natural beauty and the Jews' organic presence there. Later, emigrant nostalgia prompted the composition of what would become the city's unofficial anthem, A. L. Wolfson's saccharine folk song "Vilna" (1934, music by A. Olshanetski), originally solicited for the celebratory anthology *Vilne zamlbukh* by the Vilna branch of the Workman's Circle in New York City and premiered at the concert marking the volume's publication. The song constructs Vilna as simultaneously an object of longing and a model for a holistic Jewish universe in which past and present are integrated. It speaks to the city as a spiritual and national inheritance, passed down from one generation to the next. Its effacement of the city's multinational nature is a response to the context of its composition during a period in which Jewish rights were increasingly under attack by the authorities and local thugs. The song aggressively claimed Vilna as Jewish space (*yidishlekh fartrakht*, "Jewishly conceived"), with a refrain that roused its New World audiences for

Rabbis and Wives), *Der shtumer minyen* (*The Silent Prayer Quorum*), *Fun unter der erd* (*Beneath the Earth*); Joseph Buloff, *Fun altn markplats* (translated as *From the Old Marketplace*); Ber Halpern, *Mayn yikhes* (*My Lineage*).

"Vilna, Vilna, our mecca." When the song migrated back to Poland and was embraced by the city's residents, the lyrics were changed from "our mecca"—a site of spiritual pilgrimage and longing—to "our hometown," allowing it to serve as an anthem for more immediate political exigencies, including its collective articulation of local pride and resilience when it was later sung at community events in the ghetto.

If Wolfson's song proved effective in extending Vilna's populist, transnational reputation, it was Moyshe Kulbak's earlier neoromantic "Vilna" (1926) that opened it up as a legitimate theme for Yiddish high art by taking more seriously its complexities and contradictions. Even when Kulbak sought out cosmopolitan excitement elsewhere, he would confess "Ikh bin nokh alts a Vilner" (When all is said and done, I will always be of Vilna). Though the dominant color of Kulbak's ode is gray and a funereal atmosphere punctuates its lyrics, they evoke an undeniable mystique. The city is repeatedly compared to a text, ranging from a psalm to a prayer, an amulet to a hymn, parchment to book, suggesting that its very existence is the source of its own poetry that invites praise, meditation, lamentation, and interpretation. By the end, the speaker's public confession "I am your gray! I am your dark flame! I am the city!" transforms the city into a symbol for Polish Jewry's dreams and anxieties, its commitments and its ambivalences. The fate of Vilna and the fate of the Jews have become synonymous.

When the local writers of the literary and artistic group Yung-Vilne appeared on the cultural scene in the late 1920s, they capitalized on the city's reputation in new ways. Its members were united by a common generational experience (all of them, like Karpinowitz, were born in the years immediately before World War I) and shared a commitment to Yiddish as the medium through which they would serve both the needs of their community and the cause of Yiddish literature. The group's populist streak promoted a counter-myth of Vilna that was truer to lived experience and more amenable to destabilizing and subverting its inherited images. In poetry, these included biting parodies of local heroes and landmarks by Leyzer Volf (see, for instance, the manner by which his poem "The Vilna Synagogue Courtyard" deflates the city's sense of sacred space), expressionist evocations of political radicalism by Chaim Grade, meditations on

the generational mood by Abraham Sutzkever ("hear the fever of a mute generation"), and attempts to provide an enlarged vision of the region's multicultural diversity through Shimshon Kahan's engagement with its Gypsy and Belorussian presence. Elsewhere, Kahan's "Vilna" (1938) challenged Kulbak's carefully constructed urban mystique with a poem that suggested that the layers of inherited tradition and divisiveness of contemporary politics contributed to a toxic atmosphere in which it was barely possible to breathe.

Yung-Vilne's fiction writers, Shmerke Kaczerginski and Moyshe Levin, established the group's credentials with the Jewish street by taking up its prosaic concerns. They shared a commitment to socially engaged writing that was an important part of the group's local popularity. Readers found their own lives and concerns expressed in the social realism and naturalist stories of these young writers.

Kaczerginski excelled in his preferred genre of reportage. It allowed him to describe life in Vilna's streets and back alleys and focus attention on the experience of workers and activists. His ear for idiomatic Yiddish interspersed with Polish curses expanded the register of literary language deemed appropriate by the city's leading Yiddishists, a technique adopted later by Karpinowitz.

Levin, the group's main fiction writer, undermined romantic readings of Vilna by offering up angry vignettes of working-class life. The condition of his subjects is frequently one of anomie, alienation, humiliation, and fallen virtue. The Vilna that emerges in Levin's stories is intimately tied to the material struggles of its inhabitants. It is a world where a Jewish droshky driver picks up a pair of police officers who need to be taken to the station, only to realize that their detainee is his estranged prostitute daughter. Levin was especially keen to explore the corrosive effects of class conflict on Vilna's sense of community. The title story of his collection of stories *Friling in kellershtub* (Springtime in the Cellar, 1937) opens with the effects of seasonal floods on an impoverished neighborhood that sits along the banks of the Vilenke, a tributary to the city's main Viliye River. The threat is particularly severe to the inhabitants of this area because so many of them live below the flood line in dank cellars or in structures already damaged by years of neglect. When the Jewish community's

volunteer flood committee urges Itsik, an unemployed laborer, to evacuate, he lets loose an invective that is a flood of a different sort: "Why don't you ever come down to this neighborhood on ordinary days?! Or every day! Our life is in constant danger, not just from a surfeit of water but from a surfeit of hunger!" Levin here is not interested in the extraordinariness of Vilna but rather in the ordinary struggles of its most vulnerable. He exposed the growing fissure between residents who struggled at a time of acute economic and political vulnerability and intellectuals and expatriates who promoted the city's reputation abroad.

To the extent that Levin was unabashedly *Vilnerish* in his writings, he cleared critical ground in Yiddish prose upon which Karpinowitz could later build. One of his collections included a lexicon of terms that were part of the city's specific Yiddish vocabulary in order to maintain regional distinctions. He insisted on situating his stories with precision, contrasting the illusion of grace suggested by the city's steeples and the region's natural beauty against the bleakness of material existence. Though Karpinowitz was never an official member of Yung-Vilne, the generational impact of a homegrown literary cohort that took the city seriously as a setting and theme for art impressed itself deeply upon him.

The liquidation of Jewish Vilna between June 1941 and September 1943 initiated a new stage in the Yiddish literary engagement with the city. Yung-Vilne's prewar strategy of counter-mythology was no longer appropriate to the imperatives of resistance, then mourning and memory. Once again, the fate of the city and its residents became the subject for legendizing. While the murderous grip on their hometown tightened, poets such as Sutzkever celebrated its folk heroes ("Teacher Mira"), its cultural resilience ("Grains of Wheat," "Ghetto Theater"), and its partisan fighters ("Itsik Vittenberg," "The Lead Plates of the Romm Press," "Narotsh Forest"). When its few returning survivors recognized the extent of the community's devastation, Yiddish poetry gave voice to the pain of leave-taking:

You are my first love and my first love you will remain.
I bear your name throughout the world
as my ancestors bore the holy ark on their shoulders.

And anywhere I wander

All other cities will transform into your image.

(A. Sutzkever, "Farewell," 1943–1944)

Threnodies for Vilna soon gave way to the epic, as in Sutzkever's volume *Geheymshot* (Secret City), in which a group of ten Jews form a symbolic minyan as they hide from the Nazis in the underground dystopia of the city's sewers.

If Vilna's mythopoetic reputation was first established and then repeatedly renegotiated in Yiddish poetry as the city's survivors dispersed after its destruction, fiction's strength at thick description seemed better suited to the imperative of its imaginative reconstruction. Yiddish writing after the Holocaust was self-conscious about its responsibility as the last repository for memories of specific places, personalities, and ways of life. This was certainly true of Chaim Grade, who turned much of his creative attention from poetry to prose after his arrival in New York City. Grade's turn to fiction enabled him to capture the unique brand of Lithuanian rabbinic culture that had been part of his formative intellectual universe. His interest in the contest and moral weight of ideas recovered Vilna's position as the meeting ground of *misnagdic*, Torah-centered tradition and varieties of Jewish secular humanism. His fiction delighted in exploring the coexistence of the sacred and the profane, in alternating its attention between the richness of the city's moral and intellectual imagination and the dire material condition of most of its residents who, like his mother, struggled to eke out a living while exemplifying the modest piety of Lithuanian Jewish civilization. Grade's achievements in expansive and erudite prose that conjured entire worlds were different in scope from Karpinowitz's preference for shorter, self-contained tales focused on the persons and places associated with Vilna's vernacular existence, including his ability to disrupt standard, literary Yiddish with street dialect and words native to Vilna's Yiddish speakers.⁸ Karpinowitz's tales

8. One critic complained that "I have never read a book by a Lithuanian writer in which I did not understand so many words. . . . If the words are used for local color, the

take seriously the challenge of situating themselves in a specific geocultural landscape, one that recalls the street people and back alleys that were rarely the stuff upon which Vilna's reputation was exported. In the same way that Bashevis Singer's literary imagination was nurtured by the diverse human parade that came through his father's courtroom and the artist's atelier of his older brother, Karpinowitz benefited from growing up in a family where, literally, all the world was a stage. With two sisters who were Yiddish actresses and a father who managed a leading Yiddish theater, Karpinowitz spent his entire youth hanging around impresarios and theatergoers, many of whom could not afford even the modest price of a ticket but who were afforded a place on the balcony nonetheless. The Yiddish theater provided Karpinowitz with access to the broadest cross-section of Vilna Jewry, allowing him, as he admitted later, to "take in all this color . . . and feast on the thick stew of ordinary folk. . . . They were also a part of our people. . . . Why should they be forgotten?"⁹ Karpinowitz took this question as his aesthetic mantra. His stories often relied on private memories or collective folklore of a specific prostitute, underworld figure, wagon driver, street activist, or lunatic. In so doing, the writer sought to reveal that which was concealed underneath layers of Vilna's stylized mythology. His was a heroism of the ordinary.

As the title of this collection of stories suggests, for Karpinowitz Vilna was a visceral possession. Though his fiction resists the strain of postwar

writer owes the reader a glossary with translations." What Yiddish readers from elsewhere considered disorienting, Karpinowitz considered essential to maintaining Vilna's distinctiveness and authenticity. See Shloyme Bikl, "Avrom Karpinovitshes Vilner dertseylungen," *Shrayber fun mayn dor*, vol. 3 (Tel Aviv: Farlag Y. L. Perets, 1970), 350.

9. *Monlogn fun yidishe shraybers: Avrom Karpinovitsh* (DVD), interview by Boris Sandler (Forverts, 2012). For additional biographical information on Karpinowitz, see "Avrom Karpinovitsh," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. 8 (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1981), 147–48; Helen Beer, "Avrom Karpinovich," *Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sorrel Kerbel (Taylor and Francis, 2003), 510–13. For additional critical readings of Karpinowitz, see A. Golomb, "A. Karpinovitshes *Baym Vilner durkhoyf*," *Di goldene keyt* 60 (1967), 256–60; Yitshok Yanasovitsh, "Avrom Karpinovitsh," *Penimer un nemem*, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Kiem, 1977), 274–79; Sandra Studer, *Erinnerungen an das jüdische Vilna: Literarische Bilder von Chaim Grade und Abraham Karpinovitsh* (Köln: Böhlau, 2014).

nostalgia that continued to press Vilna as cultural utopia, it may contribute to the creation of a no less idealized Vilna in which every simple worker or gangster shares a sense of community. In the end, readers of Karpinowitz will deepen their experience of this volume of short stories by keeping in mind that Vilna was never a fixed symbol. Yiddish writers consistently reimagined the city to respond to the needs of their cultural moment. We are left with the challenge of enjoying these narratives for their full-blooded characters and acute conjuring of a dynamic time and place that met a most violent end, while maintaining our critical recognition that the further one is from the source the more seductive is its aura.

Justin Cammy

Programs in Jewish Studies and Comparative Literature
Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts