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The Untold Story of Yungvald: Inside Harvard's Leyzer Ran Archive*

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Genius of Place and the Leyzer Ran Archive

I.

For several years I lived with two Leyzers. The first was the animated parodic poet of the interwar Yiddish literary group Yung-Vilne (1927-1941). The second was the leading post-war bibliographer and ephemerist of Jewish Vilne, the city that had given birth to Yung-Vilne prior to its destruction as one of the great cultural centers of Eastern European Jewry. Both Leyzer Volf (1910-1943), all but forgotten Yiddish writer, and Leyzer Ran (1912-1995), chronicler of a murdered civilization, were sons of Vilne. Both were born there just prior to World War I, came of age in its Yiddish schools, clubs, literary circles, and political organizations, and found their calling through contributions to the development of Yiddish cultural and political life in the city through the 1930s.

Leyzer Volf drew enthusiastic audiences to public readings of his poetry, which featured zany, unpredictable verse and political parody that undermined prevailing literary conventions. He also functioned as mentor to younger talents, first in the late 1920s when he encouraged his neighbor Abraham Sutzkever² to try his hand at poetry, and then again at the end of the decade to Yungvald, a literary fellowship he established for aspiring writers in the late 1930s. For his part, Leyzer Ran earned a local reputation as one of the young leaders of the scouting organization *Bin* (Bee), a group which Max Weinreich—the Yiddish linguist and director of the city's Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO)—nurtured as the youth wing of local Yiddishism. As a young man, Leyzer Ran decided to break with Weinreich's desire to use *Bin* to carve out a non-partisan space for Jewish youth as overly naïve. Instead, he helped to guide the scouting organization towards a program of collectivization and productivization, inspired by socialist theory and Soviet models. Both Leyzers brought the energy of youth and commitment to the Jewish collective to their efforts to transform secular Jewish identity. They were nurtured in the atmosphere of *Nusekh Vilne*³, a self-conscious

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1 Leyzer Volf was the penname adopted by Leyzer Mekler. Mekler was searching to project a more assertive personality in his writing as a counterbalance to his natural shyness. He was inspired by one of his favorite Yiddish poets, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, who adopted a wolfish persona in several of his poems. In a more ironic gesture to Yiddish literary history, Leyzer Volf was also a well-known character from Sholem-Aleichem's popular narratives about Tevye the dairyman whose engagement to Tevye's oldest daughter is broken when she opts to marry for love. In assuming this penname, Leyzer Volf was at one and the same time engaging in an act of creative reinvention and anxious self-mockery.

2 Sutzkever went on to become the leading neo-classicist of Yung-Vilne. His writings from the Vilne ghetto are among the most accomplished examples of Yiddish poetry to emerge from the war, and he is widely acknowledged as the most accomplished Yiddish poet of the post-war period. He also served as founding editor of *Di goldene keyt*, a journal of Yiddish literature, culture, and criticism, which he edited from 1949 until his retirement more than forty years later.

3 Traditionally, the term *nusekh* is used to refer to a certain style, method, or liturgical formulation, very often associated with music. Here it is used metaphorically to underscore a collective energy and way of seeing the world. When Weinreich was asked why he decided to establish the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) in Vilne and not in a much larger Jewish center such as Warsaw, Berlin

civic pride in the city's importance in exporting innovations in rabbinic scholarship, Hebrew and Yiddish publishing, and socialist, Yiddishist and Zionist politics to the Jewish world. Max Weinreich explained the city's cultural dynamism to innovate from within tradition as part of Vilne's "genius of place."⁴

Leyzer Volf, like the vast majority of the city's Jewish inhabitants⁵, did not survive World War II. Though he managed to escape before the Nazis marched on the city, he died of disease in April 1943, just before his 35th birthday as a refugee in Uzbekistan. Leyzer Ran also managed to escape to the Soviet Union, and he was somewhat luckier. Though he was briefly rounded up in the mass arrests of Jewish cultural activists in the USSR, he managed to survive his incarceration and, through a circuitous route, make it to New York where, among many other accomplishments, he headed up the Vilne archive of YIVO and founded the organization *Nusekh Vilne* which gathered and published materials on the cultural life of this lost Jewish Atlantis⁶. The fate of both Leyzers, then, is the fate of Yiddish culture in the last century. Volf's was the fate of creative possibilities silenced; Ran's was the fate of a survivor and refugee who found refuge in an ingathering of documentary evidence meant to stand as a permanent memorial to a world that was no more.

II. .

When Leyzer Ran's archive arrived at the Harvard University archive, I requested permission from the Judaica Division to sift through its several dozen boxes to determine whether they contained materials that might directly inform my research on the literary group Yung-Vilne. As any scholar can attest, archival work can be a time-consuming endeavor. The search for that ideal document which might illuminate an otherwise clouded historical moment is what sustains us. The challenge of my research was compounded by the fact that Ran's archive had not yet been catalogued. Since there was no master list of its contents, I would need to go through *every* box in search of relevant materials about pre-war Vilne that Ran had collected over his post-war lifetime from colleagues and friends around the world as part of his work with the *Nusekh Vilne* organization. The ink stamp that Ran designed to mark the archive's contents—a musical note with "Leyzer Ran Archive" written in an elegant Yiddish cursive—attested to his personal investment in the project and his hope that the archive would provide future researchers with a sense of the city's complex cultural registers. A professional archivist might have cringed at its idiosyncratic organization and storage system. For instance, manuscripts and letters were folded haphazardly, thereby increasing their creasing over time, and related documents were stuffed in old envelopes or in between Sunday newspaper inserts and faintly labeled in pencil.

Every week for the better part of a year, under the watchful eye of the Judaica Division staff, I would spend an afternoon going through a new box that had been recalled for me from the warehouse. I looked forward to these afternoons, not only because of the anticipation of the unexpected, but because they proved to be a fascinating window into the psychology of post-Holocaust memorialization. By collecting

or New York, he countered: "Vilne has one thing that no other city in the world has: in Vilne Jewish tradition and a Jewish present coexist. Only from these two elements can one build a future. Tradition is critical; culture is not only built with money or workers or good intentions. There must also be genius of place."

4 Max Weinreich, "Der yidisher visnshaftlekher institut," in *Vilne: a zambukh gevidmet der shtot Vilne*. Yefim Jeshurin, ed. (New York 1935), 323.

5 Vilne's pre-war Jewish population was approximately 35,000. These numbers swelled as war loomed when Jews from the surrounding provinces and across the border in Poland sought refuge in the city. At least 40,000 of the city's Jews were murdered in the mass killings at Ponary and in the liquidations of the Vilne ghetto.

6 The most important accomplishment in this regard is his three volume *Yerushalayim de Lite* (New York, 1968-1974), a pictorial anthology of Vilne Jewry. See also Leyzer Ran, *Yidische Vilne in vort un bild* (1955) and *Ash fun Yerushalayim de Lite* (1959).

as many documentary fragments of this lost world as possible, Ran hoped that these surviving remnants would enable us to reassemble an image of the whole. The archive's pre-war materials contained political pamphlets, newspaper clippings, handwritten manuscripts and typescripts, invitations to cultural events, photographs, art exhibition brochures, and note cards—hundreds of bibliographic cards containing information on what Ran had dubbed “The Yung-Vilne Creative Generation.” At first, this term gave me some pause. As a scholar of Yung-Vilne, I used the group's own official lists and publications to determine its membership. I knew that the group accepted new members into its ranks through a careful vetting process, and that its membership had never exceeded more than a dozen creative figures⁷. By contrast, Ran considered the *entirety* of the interwar period as the “Yung-Vilne Creative Generation,” capitalizing on the reputation of the group as a metonym for a much broader local Yiddish republic of letters. His more expansive definition of Yung-Vilne included not only the group's official membership, but several *hundred* others—writers, painters, sculptors, actors, puppeteers, composers, musicians, dramaturges, journalists, and educators who existed alongside them in the interwar period. Rather than resist his definition, I came to appreciate how Ran's inclusiveness invited us to read the accomplishments of Yung-Vilne with a much richer appreciation of what it had meant to grow up and become a writer within an atmosphere in which Yiddish was the standard of a modern national culture.

Eventually, I was forced to narrow my research in the Ran archive to focus on those materials that might help me better appreciate what historian Lucy Dawidowicz called “that place and time,”⁸ and then to documents specifically related to the official membership of Yung-Vilne. Imagine my delight, then, to discover individual files on its poets Leyzer Volf, Chaim Grade, Sheyne Efron, and Hadasa Rubin; its prose writers Moyshe Levin and Shmerke Kaczerginski; and its painters, Rokhl Sutzkever and Bentsie Mikhtom. Many of these envelopes contained interwar newspaper clippings, post-war correspondence, bibliographic details, and memoirs about the individuals in question. In the more general files about Yiddish culture interwar Vilne, I came across a diverse and fascinating array of materials pertaining to the city's cultural life in which Yung-Vilne's members had been active participants. These included a collection of local Jewish art exhibit programs from the 1930s; materials from the scouting organization *Bin* in which Volf and Sutzkever spent many a summer day and night; and programs from performances by the local Yiddish theater company *Davke*, the puppet theater *Meydim*, and the Yiddish chorus to which group members had contributed their creative energies. The archive also contained rare documents that provided an appreciation of the chronology of the group's development: a letter from the city's Jewish Literary Union in January 1936 announcing the acceptance of Yung-Vilne members Chaim Grade, Leyzer Volf, Moyshe Levin, and Shmerke Kaczerginski into its ranks; a note from Avrom Sutzkever to Zalmen Reyzin, editor of the Yiddishist daily *Vilner tog*, about a celebratory gathering in Warsaw in April 1937 marking the publication of his first poetic volume; evidence of the ways in which Chaim Grade carefully balanced the street's demands for engaged political poetry against his own impulses as a neo-traditionalist, allowing him to be read differently by different audiences⁹; a rare copy of the front cover of Leyzer Volf's first book, the modernist poem *Evigingo*

7 For more on the specific origins of the group, see my articles “The Politics of Home, the Culture of Place: ‘Yung Vilne’: A Journal of Literature and Art (1934-1936), in *Judische Kultur(en) im Neuen Europa: Wilna 1918-1939*, edited by Marina Dmitrieva and Heidemarie Petersen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004), 117-133; and “Tsevorfene bleter: The Emergence of Yung Vilne,” in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, Vol. 14, edited by Antony Polonsky (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001), 170-191.

8 Lucy Dawidowicz, *From That Time and Place: A Memoir* (New York: WW Norton, 1989).

9 The leadership of the puppet theater *Meydim* welcomed Grade's maiden poetic volume *Yo* (1936) as evidence of “the growth of Yiddish proletarian poetry” in a congratulatory note I discovered from its leadership. By contrast, the publication of *Musernikes* (1939), an epic poem inspired by his experiences as a student in a particularly extreme form of religious moral education, was seen by the local branch of the Jewish Society for Tourism in Poland as a way to draw attention to the distinctiveness of Lithuanian Jewry. In its letter of February 18, 1939 congratulating Grade on the occasion of his receipt of a major literary prize for the volume, they write:

(1936), which was written in Yiddish but published in Romanized letters; and correspondence with the editor of the journal *Di tsukunft* in New York between 1931-1937 which highlighted efforts by the group to reach an international audience. Among the most touching of finds were an invitation on official Yung-Vilne stationery from July 21, 1939 inviting important Yiddish writers from overseas to submit original materials for a 10th anniversary issue of its little magazine that would never appear due to the outbreak of war six weeks later, and a letter from Moyshe Shalit, chair of the Jewish Literary Union, dated January 31, 1940 in which he requests a subsidy of heating wood from the Jewish community on behalf of its neediest members. Among the names on the list of the needy we find the Yung-Vilne writers Grade, Vogler, Levin, and Sutzkever. Though the city's international reputation and sense of self as a Yiddish cultural center was sustained by its writers, it was now the writers who needed the community's support for their physical survival.

In the course of my reading I also came across several large files of material related to the poetic career of Leyzer Volf. Ran was instrumental after the war in organizing the publication of a posthumous volume of Volf's lyrics. He was charged by the book's editor, H. Leyvik, with culling selections from Volf's prewar and wartime publications that had fallen into obscurity, tracking down the handwritten autobiography that the poet had submitted as a young man to YIVO's autobiography competition, penning the volume's biographical introduction, and submitting a bibliography.¹⁰ Ran's participation in the project was an expression of his responsibility to the legacy of *Nusekh Vilne*. The materials included hundreds of poems by Volf that Ran painstakingly retyped from their original places of publication, newspaper clippings from the 1930s with reviews of Volf's publications, several unpublished manuscripts of short stories and dramatic poems (including examples of Volf's efforts to revive Sholem-Aleichem's beloved fictional creations Teyve the dairyman and the *luftmentsh* Menakhem-Mendl), and a comprehensive bibliography of Volf's writings. Then I came across a file that Ran had hand-labeled in pencil: "Yungvald."¹¹ The following is the untold story of this last of Vilne's pre-war Yiddish literary generations.

From Generation to Generation: Yung-Vilne Gives Birth to Yungvald

By 1937, the literary group Yung-Vilne had reached maturity. Its local reputation had been secured through the publication of its own literary miscellany and regular public readings of its work. Its poets were appearing with increasing frequency in the national press, including Warsaw's literary weekly *Literarische bleter*, and several had made inroads overseas in such publications as the New York journals *Di tsukunft* and *Inzikh*. Many of its writers had already released, or were going over the final proofs of their maiden volumes. Despite these collective and individual successes, Yung-Vilne's members did not forget their origins. Unlike earlier modernist Yiddish literary groupings of the interwar period that had made their mark

"...In the Jerusalem of Lithuania, where famous writers and poets have lived and nurtured their creativity, classical Vilne has now extended its golden chain to Yung-Vilne, today led by Chaim Grade, laureate of the IKUF prize...Long live classical Vilne! Long live old Yiddish literature! Long live Yung-Vilne! Long live contemporary Yiddish literature! Long live the young Vilne writers with Chaim Grade in the lead!" These two documents attest to Grade's ability to appeal to both local radicals on the Jewish street and an international Yiddish elite readership, or to his artistry as a revolutionary traditionalist.

10 Leyzer Volf, *Lider*. Compiled by Leyzer Ran, edited by H. Leyvik (New York: Alveltlekhn yidishn kultur-kongres, 1955).

11 Ran began gathering materials related to Yungvald in the mid-1950s when he contacted its surviving members to gather submissions for a planned fifth and final issue of *Yungvald*: "On the 20th anniversary of its organization, we decided to put together a special collection in which the remaining members of Yungvald would contribute their poems, stories, drawings and memoirs. For the first time, we will publish a photograph of the Yungvald group." *Nusekh Vilne Buletin* 3 (New York, February 1958), 18. Though the planned issue never appeared, the materials may be found in the Ran Archive. My reconstruction of Yungvald's history is based on the handwritten memoirs and poetry submitted to Ran, and my reading of four rare issues of the magazine the group published between January-April, 1939.

by rebelling against the literary establishment, Yung-Vilne had been a product of the city's cultural elite, mentored into existence by the Yiddish poet Moyshe Kulbak, the newspaper editor and writer Zalmen Reyzin, and YIVO director Max Weinreich. It was time, according to the group's spiritual guide and organizer Shmerke Kacerginski, for the group to repay the favor. They were spurred to act after a Yung-Vilne event in early 1937 when a sixteen year old by the name of Hirsh Glik approached the stage and bashfully revealed that he also wrote and "there is an entire group of us."¹² A few days later, Kacerginski met with Glik, this time with his friends Moyshe Gurvitsh, Moyshe Rabinovitsh, and Sheva Faynberg in tow. The small group soon expanded from its initial cohort to include Yitskhok Vidutshinski, Shloyme Kahan, and Fayvl Segal, all still in their teens.

Kacerginski contacted his Yung-Vilne colleague Leyzer Volf to inquire whether he might be willing to mentor some youth with literary aspirations who lived down the street from him. Though the poetic persona Lezyer Volf evoked great confidence, in fact it was a penname he adopted early in his career.¹³ In real life, he was quite shy. He preferred to spend most of his free time with his beloved cat and mother, and was reputed to be the only male in Vilne involved in its industry of sewing the fingers on leather gloves. Kacerginski, who was gregarious by nature, hoped that this opportunity might encourage Volf to be a bit more social.

The contact with Volf proved would prove creatively fruitful to his students, especially in persuading them that Yiddish remained a viable language for poetic expression. This was not initially obvious to all of Yungvald's future members, several of whom attended the city's Hebrew language schools and grew up in its Zionist youth movements. As Gurin explains: "For seven years I attended the Hebrew day school *Tarbut*... At the age of 13 [1934] I joined the [Zionist] scouting organization *Hashomer hatsair* and I remained a member until the war... In 1936, when I began to write, I tried my hands at some Hebrew poems and short stories. Yiddish Vilne soon consumed my Hebrew... Under Volf's influence, we moved [from writing in Hebrew] to Yiddish."¹⁴ Gurin's comments are critical in eroding the myth, propagated by Vilne's Yiddishist elite, of the city as the only major Polish city where Yiddish was organic to Jewish public culture. Gurin reminds us that the hold of Yiddish on the imagination of youth was, at best, tenuous and needed constant nurturing in order to remain dynamic and relevant to those who saw Hebrew as the language of Jewish nationalism and Polish as the language of economic opportunity and European culture.

Leyzer Volf's home on Great Snipeshok Street (*Wilkomirska* in Polish) soon quickly emerged as Yungvald's spiritual address. The neighborhood was a colorful working class area across the Viliye river from the city's traditional Jewish quarter. As Perets Miranski, Volf's colleague in Yung-Vilne described it:

Great Snipeshok:...It started at a church, followed by military barracks. But beyond that resided the Jews. 90% of the street was Jewish. First there were the teachers and a handful of well off Jews. In the middle were the blue collar Jews like

12 Nakhmen Mayzil, "Hirsh Glik: Zayn lebn un shafn," in Hirsh Glik, *Lider un poemes* (New York: IKUF, 1953), 17. In Moyshe Gurin's handwritten memoir, he affirms that Hirsh Glik, Moyshe Rabinovitsh, and he began meeting as early as 1935 due to their shared passion for writing. It took them another two years before they reached out to Kacerginski for guidance. See Gurin, "Yungvald: A bintl zikhroynes vegn der grupe," ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

13 See note 1. In the same way that Leyzer Mekler assumed the literary persona Leyzer Volf, several members of Yungvald took his lead in assuming literary pennames. Moyshe Gurvitsh published under the name Moyshe Gurin, Moyshe Rabinovitsh published under the name Moyshe Blit, and Yitshok Vidutshinski published as Yitskhok Demb. Henceforth, when referring to these figures I will use the names under which they published in Yungvald.

14 Moyshe Gurin, "A kurtse biografiye fun Moyshe Gurin," ms., Leyzer Ran Archive. Though most of Yungvald's members were locals, Yitshok Vidutshinski's parents sent him from the provinces to Vilne when he was 13 so that he could attend the city's Yiddish gymnasium. His contacts outside of the city proved useful later on when he was charged with distributing the group's magazine to smaller Jewish towns in the Vilne region.

droshke drivers who divided themselves by family, and at the end were the mercantile Jews, the storeowners who traded with the peasants from the surrounding villages...In the middle of it all there was coal market. In the summertime wood that had been shipped down the river was traded there, and in the winter, the street was populated by tough Jews who knew how to throw a punch...At the end of the street there were little shops and village traders. There, on a half-paved street crammed with homes, I lived across the street from my cousin Hirsh Glik. It was the colorfulness of the street that influenced so many poets.¹⁵

This surfeit of creative energy was tempered by the challenging material conditions in which they all lived. Moyshe Gurin's recollections of his childhood are typical of those friends who would join him in establishing Yungvald:

My father was frequently unemployed. And my mother, like most mothers of the neighborhood, could only help out with sighs and moans. For seven years I attended the Hebrew school Tarbut. When I graduated in 1935, at the age of 14, the difficult situation at home required me to go out and work, first at a furniture shop, then as a clerk in an ironworks business...It was difficult work - usually from 7:30 in the morning to 9 or 10 at night. I would run the 6 km home, through rain and snow, trying to avoid the [Polish] hooligans waiting in the lanes.¹⁶

The contrast between the young writers' meager physical resources and the refuge they found in writing is a common theme of the Yungvald memoirists. Gurin recalls their first Friday night gathering at Leyzer Volf's in 1937 as one sated with anticipation: "Our thin pages shook under our arms...How would we be received?...The door opened with a heavy squeak. Leyzer's mother was lighting Sabbath candles...We entered a second room and sat by a gas lamp to read our first poems in Yiddish. Leyzer listened carefully... He pointed to the weak parts and gave us our first lecture about poetry...One thing was clear to us...We suddenly had a leader and a teacher."¹⁷

The group continued to meet at Leyzer's home every Friday evening or Saturday after lunch to read their newest works, listen to critiques of their writing, leaf through new books or journals that Leyzer had received, and hear their teacher read from his newest creations. Instead of the synagogue, this secular generation religiously dedicated their Sabbaths to the Yiddish muse around Leyzer Volf's table, which his mother always set with a white table cloth out of respect for the occasion. Gurin metaphorically compares his membership in Yungvald (which translates as Virgin Forest) as akin to being a part of a holy fellowship. In the same way that one might remove one's shoes upon entering divine space, so too were these weekly meetings experienced by those present as a spiritual experience: "I entered the forest with a friend / leaving my shoes on the floor...I asked my friend/: What do you see in the trees? / A blossoming dream."¹⁸ Moyshe Blit recalls how those literary gatherings sustained them for the entire week: "From that moment on we gathered every week at Leyzer's, also organizing walks outside the city among ourselves where we would read our writings. We were so used to Leyzer and to these meetings that when something came up and we could not meet for a week or two, we would all feel wretched."¹⁹

The program at these weekly meetings was ritualized, with the engaged study of one another's writing

15 Perets Miranski, "An elegye nokh tsvey khaveyrim, Leyzer Volf un Hirshke Glik," *Kultur un lebn* 4 (December 1983), 27-28.

16 Gurin, "A kurtse biografye," ms.

17 Moyshe Gurin, "Yungvald: a bintl zikhroynes vegn der grupe," ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

18 Moyshe Gurin, "Yungvald: A Tree of Memory Amid a Forest of Forgetfulness, for Leyzer Volf" (poem, 16-19 December, 1957), ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

19 Moyshe Blit, "Oytobiografiye," ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

a secular transference of the traditional Jewish appetite for analysis of holy writ. Everyone always sat in the same place so as to encourage discipline. Each aspiring writer would be given an opportunity to read a draft of the work that he considered most polished. Feedback and discussion then ensued. When all of the beginners had completed their readings, Volf would go over to his literary stash to select something of his own to present. His desk and armoire were in the same room where these weekly Sabbath meetings took place, and its drawers were stuffed with hundreds of pieces of paper and the narrow accounting books on which he compulsively scribbled his ideas. Whenever he read, Volf would rub his bald head and recite his poetry in a monotone voice, interrupting himself only with the occasional chuckle.²⁰ The experience was enough to mesmerize all in attendance. Gurin recalls that “we sat as if in another world,”²¹ while Demb adds:

The mood at Volf’s was always festive. His comments on our diction, grammatical problems related to rhythm, and content were not the most important thing. More important was that we had Yung-Vilne’s poet of the people as our mentor. He didn’t let any beginner slip through his fingers. He sat over us as a hen sits over its eggs, waiting with great anticipation for the little chicks to peck their way out... And then the door would swing open and in would run the young neighborhood composer Leyb Egoz who would throw himself down at the table and sing the music he had just composed to one of Leyzer’s poems... The atmosphere was songful.²²

Yungvald’s Sabbath gatherings at Leyzer’s home were an occasion not only for its neophyte writers to learn the process of creative collaboration, but to learn technique from established poets. Though Volf was their official guide and host, at any moment one of his friends from Yung-Vilne might drop in unannounced to participate. Sutzkever and Miranski, both of whom lived on the same street, were frequent guests. This was a way for Yung-Vilne to take ownership over the literary generation that might succeed them, and it provided Yungvald with the singular opportunity to discuss the latest developments in Yiddish literature with leading members of the city’s literary scene. Yung-Vilne’s mentorship of their younger colleagues was reciprocated by Yungvald’s committed following of their teachers. “We did not miss a single literary evening dedicated to Yung-Vilne or one of its members. We looked up to our older colleagues with respect, and listened to their advice.”²³ Volf also attempted to expose his protégées to the multilingual nature of the contemporary literary scene by occasionally inviting a Polish or Belarusian writer to the group’s meetings, as when Maxim Tank (the future People’s Poet of Soviet Belarus) arrived one afternoon.²⁴

What comes through in the various memoirs of Volf by his former students in Yungvald is the seriousness of his mentoring and the force of his artistic personality. Fayvl Segal, one of its last members to join, recalls his introduction to the group:

In 1939 I met and befriended Hirshke Glik. I revealed my poetic aspirations to him. He invited me to come to a meeting of “Yungvald”, a young writers group of which he was a member. One Sabbath day that spring Glik brought me over to Volf’s for a meeting of the group. I was clutching my notebook as I went to my judgment. Leyzer’s apartment on Wilkomirska 28 was at the far end of a deep courtyard... I introduced myself and I heard his curt response: Leyzer Mekler... Huge eyes from under a high, naked forehead gazed out at me. His mouth

20 Yitzhok Demb, “A shabes bay Leyzer Volfn,” ms. Leyzer Ran Archive.

21 Gurin, “Yungvald: A bintl zikhroynes vegn der grupe,” ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

22 Yitzhok Demb, “A shabes bay Leyzer Volfn,” ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

23 Gurin, “Yungvald: a bintl zikhroynes vegn der grupe,” ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

24 Blit, “Oytobiografiye,” ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

pulled into a smile... This Leyzer was absolutely unlike the wolfish Leyzer I expected from having read his poems....He spoke like a peer among peers....He taught with a warm word and friendly eyes, delicately, confidently, without getting worked up...At the end of the meeting, Leyzer invited me to read something of my own. As far as I can remember, I read a poem about Vilne. I thought that it was my best sample. At first, his eyes shone...But then his face became cold. He thought for a moment silently: 'You have to polish more.' Seeing my reaction, he went on: 'The beginning is so-so, it must be reworked.' He then turned back to the gathering as if nothing had happened.

I left shattered. Glik mocked my sad mood.²⁵

Segal's recollections go on to describe his efforts to rework the poem, and the joy of satisfaction when Volf complimented its revisions and suggested to the group that it be published. When Segal brought a series of artistic sketches he had completed to one of their gatherings in 1939, Volf immediately introduced him to Yung-Vilne's graphic artist Bentsie Mikhtom who suggested that one appear in the next issue of the magazine. Segal fondly remembers: "We all loved him...He tended to our young forest like an expert gardener."²⁶ In dedicating his Sabbaths to the youth of Yungvald for the better part of two years, Volf behaved as if he "felt himself as much a member of Yungvald as of Yung-Vilne."²⁷ This was the way of *Nusekh Vilne* in which one generation assumed responsibility for the next.

The Yungvald Magazine

By 1938, the group decided that the time was ripe put out a magazine to showcase its writing. It was only then that they actually settled on the name Yungvald. Prior to that, there had been no need to provide a label to the regular gatherings of these literary amateurs. Its selection was a nod to its parent group, Yung-Vilne, which was metaphorically sprouting new growths through them. Yungvald had also been the name of an early Soviet Yiddish publication; in reclaiming this name from the archives of Yiddish literary history they were suggesting that it was their variety of cultural Yiddishism, not communism, that was the truer vanguard for the Jewish nation.²⁸

The four issues of *Yungvald: a literarishe zamlheft* that appeared between January and April 1939 were a source of great pride to the young writers. Though Moyshe Rabinovitsh was listed as editor on its masthead so that the group would be able to take ownership over its creative production, its contributors readily acknowledged that Volf served as its guiding creative force and shadow editor.²⁹ The miscellany was professionally set at the local press of Sz. Lichtmakher, but it did not carry any visual art and was kept to a modest eight pages in length in order to minimize costs. Volf's own contributions—published under his own penname or via such pseudonyms as *Beast of Courage* or *Heart of the Night*—amounted to almost half of each issue's contents. His presence in its pages granted prestige to the new publication.

The remainder of the space was reserved for the most polished work by Yungvald's own membership. Though Glik, Gurin, Blit, and Demb all secured regular space in its pages, the work of Sheva Feynberg and Fayvl Segal did not have an opportunity to appear before economic pressures forced the magazine's sudden

25 Fayvl Segal, untitled memoir, ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

26 Fayvl Segal, untitled memoir, ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

27 Moyshe Gurin, letter to Leyzer Ran (14 December 1957), Leyzer Ran Archive.

28 *Mlodi Las (Young Forest)* also happened to be a Polish film playing in local theaters at the time that these Yiddish writers were deciding on a name for their group.

29 Rabinovitsh also published in the journal, though under the last name Blit.

closure prior to the release of a planned fifth issue in May. Though they issued an appeal to the community in an attempt to secure the magazine's survival ("Young and old...Read *Yungvald*. Advertise. We must disseminate *Yungvald* to our youth"³⁰), by 1939 the economic situation of Jewish Vilne was so desperate that even this center of Yiddish culture could not support them.

The magazine's overall tone was dominated by Leyzer Volf's irony and humor, and by the artistic range of his contributions. These included fables, a dramatic poem, short lyrics, prose sketches, and tongue and cheek biographical tributes to fellow writers. His pithy, often irreverent observations communicated the importance of levity as a counterforce to the political storm brewing across the Western border with Germany, the threats against Jews that accompanied the rise of Polish nationalism, and the challenging economic conditions for many local Jews:

- The sun is good, so long as it isn't in your eyes.
- Art is desire, and ability.
- Do not hate with all your soul, or you will lose your soul. Love with all your soul, and you will win a soul.
- That which doesn't frighten us is unnatural.
- Do we come from apes? Perhaps it is the opposite.
- Dictators dictate, but a dictate is rarely without its followers.
- On the boundary between suffering and hope is love.
- If the world had a beginning, it must have an end.³¹

These aphorisms and random 'thoughts' on the human condition that he published in each issue were playfully philosophical, a tension between mood and thought that was a signature of his poetic style.

Elsewhere, the prose miniatures and fables that Volf contributed to each issue allowed him to show his students how one could comment indirectly on the political crisis brewing around him through exoticized settings and characters. In one such example, the ramblings of a warmongering Latin American leader conclude with the nihilist vision that "humanity wants murder. Without murder there is no humanity."³² Elsewhere, as in "Allah," we find his trademark irreverence coupled with a humanist's sensibility. Allah is sitting in the shadows smoking a cigarette when he is approached by a pretty young woman who reveals that "I feel like the only survivor of a sinking ship. Can I count on your love?" Rather than make a promise he cannot keep, Allah smiles back at her and asserts that what is truly needed to realize a better world is more love for one another and less faith in higher causes: "Madame, nobody feels as alone as Allah, and nobody is as alone as Allah! Can I count on your love?"³³ Volf brings responsibility for salvation down from the heavens to humanity. Even in the fables that he contributed to *Yungvald*, Volf took advantage of the surface innocence of the genre to comment on the brutality of the age and its seeming lack of ethical responsibility.

Volf also used the new magazine to replay some of his more outrageous poetic stunts in order to prompt *Yungvald's* writers to free themselves from their poetic inhibitions. For instance, the second issue included six lyrics from Volf's series "1001 Poems" that he had composed in June 1930 when he was attempting to break the world record for the number of poems written in a month. Back then Volf was just starting out in his career, much like the students he was now mentoring. His selections implied that there was a large world of creative possibilities beyond the narrowness of their immediate environment:

30 *Yungvald: A literarische zamlheft* 4 (April 1939), 6.

31 Herts Nakht (Heart of the Night), "Aphorisms" and "Thoughts," *Yungvald* 1 (January 1939), 8; *Yungvald* 3 (March 1939), 8. *Yungvald* 4 (April 1939), 6.

32 Bestye Kurazh (Beast of Courage), "Der dictator un di mentsshayt," *Yungvald* 1 (January 1939), 8.

33 Bestye Kurazh, "Allah," *Yungvald* 4 (April 1939), 6.

Vilne has become ugly to me
 With its mangy ghetto streets.
 Off into the wide world.
 Join a circus.
 Become president of America
 Or King of England
 Or a crocodile in the Nile
 Or a poem in an amazing style.³⁴

The two opening lines deflate the poetic pride of place that had reached its apex in Moyshe Kulbak's neo-romantic ode to the city ("Vilne," 1926) and set his students free to rebel in any way they choose against the expectations of their community.

On a different note, Volf's review in *Yungvald* of Elkhonen Vogler's poetic volume *Tsvey beriozes baym trakt* (*Two Birch-trees on the Highway*, 1938) demonstrated the importance of a literary coterie in celebrating the achievements of its members. Vogler was Volf's longtime colleague in Yung-Vilne, and that group made it a habit of honoring its members whenever one of them published a new volume. The review not only afforded Volf the opportunity to underscore the importance of mutual support in the creative process, but also proved an effective aesthetic teaching moment, given complaints from professional critics elsewhere that Vogler's verse—a symbolist's reading of local landscape—was too artistically complicated and politically detached to resonate with contemporary readers. Volf responded by celebrating the volume's "symphony of metaphor," commending Vogler for "let[ting] his fantasy run free. He does not attempt to dampen his poetic vision with the cold sharpness of the rational... He is intuitive, wild, unique, and beautifully crazy... He does not so much ignore human beings as much as he runs from them, taking refuge in the forest."³⁵ In this way, Volf provided permission to his charges to allow their imaginations the greatest possible freedom.

At the same time that Volf imagined poetry as a liberating force, he also struggled to root his young saplings in a literary tradition. Through pithy biographic sketches of such Yiddish writers as Sholem-Aleichem, Y.L. Perets, Morris Rosenfeld, Yehoash, I.M. Vaysenberg, A. Lyessin, H. Leyvik, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, and Moyshe Kulbak he provided *Yungvald* with an identity as heirs to a significant literary tradition, while suggesting that they not treat it too piously.

Volf also used *Yungvald* to showcase his attempts to mine the Yiddish literary tradition for inspiration. In so doing he sought to keep it relevant for younger generations who were increasingly influenced by Polish culture. For instance, he published a new fictional exchange of letters between Sholem-Aleichem's beloved couple Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl. He began work on this series of new series epistolary interchanges between the pair in 1935, with the intention of publishing a book called *The New Menakhem-Mendl* upon its completion. Though the book was never finished (and its manuscript lost during the war) this was yet another gesture of creative betrayal designed to demonstrate the richness of the Yiddish literary well.³⁶ Menakhem-Mendl, prototype for the *luftmentsh*, and Sheyne-Sheyndl, the feminine force of practicality, were ideal voices through which to contemplate how his spirit of unbridled optimism and her traditional rationalism would have dealt with the challenges of the Jewish 1930s. In Volf's fantasy, Sheyne-Sheyndl has grown old in their imagined shtetl of Kasrilevke, urging her husband to give up on the political and economic (false) messianisms he has bought into and return home. But

34 Leyzer Volf, "From 1001 Poems," *Yungvald 2* (February 1939), 4.

35 Héerts Nakht, "Review: E. Vogler, *Tsvey beriozes baym trakt*," *Yungvald 2* (February 1939), 5.

36 For more on the concept of "creative betrayal" as it relates to Jewish literary studies, see David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 5-9.

Menakhem-Mendl is smitten with the fantasy of new Jewish worlds elsewhere, first writing to her from a Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel and then from a collective in Soviet Birobidzhan (a strange place indeed for this character who had, until then, represented the excesses of capitalist fantasy). Both Israel and Birobidzhan function as alternative sites for the creation of the “new Jew” and his renewed relationship to land. In the excerpt that Volf submitted to *Yungvald*, we meet up with Menakhem-Mendl in Paris where he is a struggling shopkeeper awaiting a travel certificate to Birobidzhan. Volf takes great pleasure in playing up the innocence that Sholem-Aleichem first brought to this character by showing him somewhat out of his league in understanding the significance of his surroundings and the times. His letters refer to Einstein (“Einstein himself comes to buy from me. He says that ‘everything is relative’. By this he probably means that we’re not at all in good shape”), Hitler (“Hitler discovered that my great grandmother slept with Frederick the Great. It’s possible that I’m entitled to a piece of the inheritance”), and Stalin (“I’ll remain eternally poor if the second five year plan of Comrade Stalin doesn’t help soon. It’s useless. Trotsky no longer stands up for me.”). Menakhem-Mendl’s complete lack of sophistication in being able to distinguish between friend and foe shows that for the simple Jew the age of ideology has not provided greater clarity in how one should relate to the world but rather has added to his confusion and dislocation. In the same letter in which he writes of reestablishing himself in Birobidzhan, Menakhem-Mendl also suggests to his wife that if they can make it through another year they will be able to “preside over our own counter in Palestine.” Given the animosity between Jewish Zionists and communists, the intimation that either option would suit him just fine suggests that the ultimate goal for Menakhem-Mendl is to get out of Europe altogether. By this point, political convictions are secondary to saving one’s skin.

By contrast, Sheyne-Sheyndl continues to function as the stern voice of practical reality by attempting to re-focus her husband’s attention on the necessity of circling the wagons at home.

To my dear husband Menakhem-Mendl,

Meyshe went off for a year to a kibbutz, and Meylekhl now sits in jail. What did he do? He hung a banner on a wire and a cop caught him... You should have beaten him to a pulp. Now he will be in jail for eight years... If you happen to know Hitler then run some interference with him on behalf of our Meylekhl. I want to be entirely clear with you. If you don’t come home by Purim I will find you and beat your brains out with a slab of wood. As Mother says: ‘pride and foolishness have the same source.’ What do you think of that?... I am old, sick, and broken. I toil with my last ounce of strength. And you still live on faith alone... Though you have nothing material to speak of, there is no shame in that. Tell me, who is this Frida the Great from whom you expect an inheritance?... in God’s name, do not journey to Birobidzhan... And don’t think that you can hitch onto some pioneer with a cerpificate [sic] and run away with her to Palestine. I’m telling you: I can also be a heroine. I will cast aside the children, run after you, and drag you home on all fours. As Mother says: ‘A thief has bars on his cell [to keep him in check], and children ought to have a father’...³⁷

Such adaptations of Sheyne-Sheyndl’s folk-wisdom from her mother, used to underscore modernity’s challenges to the coherence of the Jewish family, were central components in Volf’s aesthetic of sophisticated folksiness. In updating the Menakhem-Mendel letters for a new generation of readers Volf invited contemporary Yiddish authors to express their opinions about the state of Jewish political life from *within* the contours of their literary tradition rather than outside of it.

37 Leyzer Volf, “Menakhem-Mendl un Sheyne-Sheyndl,” *Yungvald* 3 (March 1939), 1-4. Volf earlier published a fragment from his “Menakhem-Mendl in Birobizhan” in *Vilner tog* (February 14, 1936). He also attempted to revive the character of Tevye, another of Sholem-Aleichem’s fictional creations, though he never published his new Tevye episode. See “Tevye der milkhiker: naye monologn,” ts., Abraham Sutzkever Archive (Leyzer Volf file, 100), National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

By the spring of 1939, it was almost impossible for a Yiddish writer in Poland to escape the pressure of the so-called Jewish question. Yiddish readers looked to their writers for guidance in helping them negotiate their anxieties. Volf struggled to find a balance between his commitment to art and the politics of the street. He eventually allied himself with a local branch of the Territorialist movement, in part because it provided a convenient home for the continued expression his cultural Yiddishism. At a conference of the Territorialist Freeland League held in Vilne in January 1939, he concluded: "At first, I was a cosmopolitan. But then I realized that for a people to live normal life it must have the space to live within its own culture. Yiddish language and culture can only exist and continue to freely develop when our nation is geographically concentrated and liberated from undue foreign influences."³⁸ The Territorialists' plans to develop Jewish colonies for the masses in East Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe seemed to him a necessary step to ensure the survival of a sphere for Yiddish in the face of threats to the heart of Yiddishland from Nazi Germany to the West, communist Russia to the East, and Polish nationalism from within. In Vilne, the focus of the Freeland League was less on immediate emigration than on training local youth in agriculture, industrial productivization, and Jewish cultural self-confidence.

Volf rejoined *Shparber*, the youth wing of the Territorialists, in 1938, after having broken with it earlier in the decade. He ran for city elections on its list, traveled to Warsaw to meet with young representatives of the Freeland League there, and led a *Shparber* summer camp for teenagers in the summer of 1939.³⁹ Since his work with Yungvald coincided with his renewed political activities, several of his mentees in Yungvald followed him into *Shparber* and took up its cause. The final issue of *Yungvald* anticipated the artistic fruition of these political commitments with the announcement of the pending completion of Volf's futuristic novel *Mizrekh un mariw* ("East and West"). In it he planned to imagine how three current proposed solutions to the Jewish question had played out at the end of the 20th Century: a Soviet Jewish republic in Birobidzhan, a Hebrew-speaking Zionist homeland Palestine, and a Yiddish Free Land in Australia.⁴⁰ Despite an announcement in the final issue of *Yungvald* that the novel would appear in weekly installments after Passover, the magazine ceased publication after its April issue. Volf never saw it through to publication elsewhere and the manuscript disappeared with Volf's other writings during the war. His political commitments left little doubt that it would affirm the cultural necessity of creating independent Yiddish-speaking communities organized around the principles of secular humanism and equality *elsewhere* as a way to secure a future for Yiddish culture. At the same time that he was nurturing the next local generation of Yiddish writers, he had also concluded that preparations needed to be put in place to transplant them to more welcoming soil.⁴¹

38 *Vilner tog* (January 20, 1939).

39 For more on Volf's role in the local political scene and the development of *Shparber* [Hawk], see Mikhoel Astour, *Geshikhhte fun der frayland lige* (New York, 1964), 36-40, 368-369, 395. On the eve of World War II, Astour claims that *Shparber* had grown into the second largest youth movement in Vilne in numbers, behind only the Bundist *Tsukunft* (The Future).

40 *Yungvald* 4 (April 1939), 6.

41 In February and March, 1939 his Territorialist poem "Forn mir, forn mir af shifn" was hugely popular among the youth in *Shparber*. It was about young pioneers waiting to leave Eastern Europe so that they could get to rebuilding the physical and cultural framework of secular Jewry in new colonies elsewhere. The rhyme and rhythm of the Yiddish original invited the poem to be recited as a mass cheer. "Here we go, here we go on ships/waves, show us the way!/Towards a deep forest/to a wonderful distant shore./ We're off, we're on our way/into wide open fields./No murderers there to ambush us./It's a promising free world.../A bird twitters in amazement:/ 'Are the Jews also building a new nest?'/ 'Bird, Bird!', we answer in Yiddish/ 'Of course we're building, as you can see..." A copy of the poem can be found in the Leyzer Ran Archive.

Yungvald's Young Voices

Leyzer Volf's poetic persona dominated *Yungvald*. His contributions set its tone and provided it with the credibility of a published poet. However, the magazine was also a forum for Vilne's newest writers who were not yet artistically mature enough to be admitted into Yung-Vilne itself or who needed some local exposure before their contributions might be accepted by the Yiddish press. What were they interested in writing about in the winter of 1939? As might be expected, death, anxiety about the future, and economic hardship were consistent themes. Moyshe Gurin effectively communicated the mood of this generation by having his speakers perform their own self-effacement.

Ikh bin an anderer.	I am something else.
Nisht der vos kh'bin a mol geven.	Not who I used to be.
Ikh bin an eynzamer vanderer,	I am a lonely wanderer
a balodener mit pek.	Loaded down with sacks.
Es iz der griner barg nishto	The hill is no longer green,
Es iz dos shtikl himl-blo	And the last blue of the sky
farshvundn fun mayn oyg.	has disappeared from my gaze.
Un unter shvern gepek	And under my heavy load
bafalt mikh oft mol oykh a shrek	I am overcome by the fear
az ikh aleyn bin oykh nishto. ⁴²	That I too am no more.

The poem's expression of lethargy and alienation is in direct contrast to the positive spirit described in Gurin's own post-war memoirs of Yungvald's group gatherings, suggesting that their weekly meetings may have provided only temporary psychological shelter against the effects of economic need and political uncertainty. For instance, the speaker of Gurin's "Storm" issues a solitary *cri de coeur*.

Hey shturem, shtarker shturem	Hey storm, fierce storm
ikh aleyn bin afn turem	I alone am in the tower
un di velt far mir a hoyle	The world before me is a bloody
a tseblutike, gekoylet	abyss, murdered
fun dayn vey! ⁴³	By your sharp pain.

Gurin's lyric typifies the mood of the young poets' verse, which portrays them as the lonely, deformed survivors of an inescapable cataclysm. The social nature of their configuration as a group did not seem to dull this profound solitude.⁴⁴

The group's prose writer Yitskhok Demb was particularly concerned with the explosion of Jewish poverty that dominated his world. By 1939, Vilne Jewry was deeply stratified by class. A modest middle class lived in the newer areas of the city, especially in the neighborhood of Pohulanke, whereas the working class was confined to Snipeshok or to the treeless, crowded alleys of the traditional Jewish quarter. In order to draw attention to the widening social gap produced by class divisions, he alternated between naturalistic depictions of urban poverty and satire. In one such naturalistic vignette, "The Porter," he depicts the harsh effects of the winter conditions on the body and morale of a simple laborer. The reader is made to feel the effects of the rope as it tears into his shoulders and presses against his veins while he carries his wares to

42 "About Myself," *Yungvald* 4 (April 1939), 5.

43 Moyshe Gurin, "Storm," *Yungvald* 3 (March 1939), 5-6.

44 See also M. Biter's "A Slave from Canaan" ("My wine garden is in ruins/My sheep long ago slaughtered/I am but a shadow of myself / Give me the gift of eternal sleep"); Yoysel Shvarts's "Death" ("This is how death will come:/ He will take me by the hand/ And we will move silently./Nobody will know, except for my shadow on the wall,/ And my old dog who will let out a bark./ This is how it will be:/ The sun will continue to play in the window./ Nothing will be missing, except for me./ I will not be there / a mere speck of sand from the shore, a piece of dust."); and Shloyme Cohen's "I Stand On the Edge of a Field" (A castle is built on a cloud/ And my dream is slowly drawn there./ It floats there in sadness/just like the clouds in the heavens.). Each of these poems imagines the disappearance of the self in ways that suggest a profound generational depression. *Yungvald* 4 (April 1939), 4-5.

his uncaring customers. The entire atmosphere is bleak and devoid of any color except for grays and dirty whites. All the while, the porter's four-year-old son lies at home frozen because his family is unable to afford sufficient wood for heating. His body is not curled up in childhood warmth but is as taut as the porter's rope carried by his father.⁴⁵ Poverty has become a generational inheritance from which there seems to be little escape. Demb also tried his hand at satire as a form of class critique. In "The Mademoiselle's Oy" he mocks the speech patterns of the Jewish parvenu by showcasing the ways in which a wealthy woman peppers her comments with oy to express everything from exasperation and disgust to pity and joy. The reader is carried away by her repertoire, allowing Demb to craft a biting satire of those who are indifferent to the lives of those who serve them and suffer around them.

- "Valie, Valie! Oy, move faster, Valie!"

The thin, frightened servant girl appeared on the edge of the threshold: - "What is it, Madame?"

- "Has the seamstress come with my dress?"

- "No, Madame, not yet!"

- "But it is already eleven and at three I have to go out with Jerik. Oy, this is terrible. Oy, how can I possibly complete my toilette in such a short time?" ... She was already an older young woman at 31... She nervously tapped with her stick and let out a chorus of oys. She oyed about the unfinished work of the seamstress, about the short time for her to get herself together, and about many other matters. This "oy" was a nervous oy. An oy mixed with a sigh.

When Valie came back with the dress she let out a high-pitched oy, full of joy. But then, noticing the seamstress with her, she let loose an angry oy, full of rage.

- "Oy, so late! I wanted it no later than ten. Oy, people these days have no sense of punctuality!"

The seamstress also answered with an oy. A pitiful oy, one that falls softly to one's feet...

... The mistress walked to the place they had agreed upon. She needed the fresh air. She had arranged to meet Jerik next to Zimmerman's hotel and it was a ten minute walk at most. Another oy escaped, this time a sighing one. And when she came across someone in the clothes of a laborer—hands blackened, face waxen, eyes fallen—she oyed to herself: "How can people go about like that? Oy, aren't people ashamed! Oy, I don't accept this. Oy, I'm dying! Oy... Do I still have far to go?..."

They were capricious oys. Nervous oys!... She couldn't get rid of the image of the worker in front of her—his smell, his sweat. And out escaped another oy. She followed it with a second one that had more pity to it, something that conveyed the essence of "poor man, poor thing, he doesn't earn enough." She grabbed for her handbag and handkerchief, dabbed her eyes, and deposited a long, extended oy into the bag... And when she saw Jerik's limousine and then Jerik himself outside Zimmerman's hotel, she let out a radiating oy of joy.⁴⁶

If the aforementioned young contributors to *Yungvald* constituted its supporting cast, Hirsh Glik was its most promising star and Volf's favorite student. Though the broad shouldered poet with the dirty boots, a poetic forelock, and deep blue eyes was only 17 when the group came together in 1937, he quickly emerged as its most productive member. *Yungvald* published seven of his works in its short run, and his poetry also managed to find his way into the local Yiddish press. Glik's fellow writers immediately recognized his talent, even if he required a little encouragement. Though his cousin Perets Miranski remembers Glik as a shy young teenager ("He would come to me trembling... to drop off his booklet of newly written po-

45 Yitskhok Demb, "Der treger (The Porter)," *Yungvald* 4 (April 1939), 2-3.

46 Yitskhok Demb, "Di froy vos oyket," *Yungvald* 1 (January 1939), 3.

ems, and then ran off, too shy to wait to hear a good word about them"⁴⁷), the group atmosphere and close mentorship of Yungvald was just what he needed in order to cut his poetic teeth and gain some confidence. Blit remembers that "if Leyzer [Volf] provided the tone and leadership [for Yungvald], Glik provided its soul."⁴⁸ Demb adds that "Glik did not read his poems, he sang them in a melodic, elevated voice...He was the most beloved of our small gang."⁴⁹ He was admired not only for spirit, but also for his commitment to his development as a writer. Glik's family counted on him for its economic survival, and he often could be found downtown dragging heavy packages as part of his work as a shipping apprentice in a paper business. Every moment free from work was spent on his literary development. As he once quipped: "I could go twice a week without lunch, but never a Friday without *Literarishe bleter!*"⁵⁰

"Once upon a Time," Glik's first poem to appear in Yungvald, expressed the tension between the speaker's dreams of escape and his eventual acceptance that in these challenging times, it was time to develop the home front:

Ikh hob getroymt a mol
tsu vern a milner in a vint-mil
hinter a vaytn barg, hinter a zaydn grinem tol,
hinter zign taykhelekh sheftshndike shtil...

Hot a vint mayn troym fartrogn.

Ikh hob getroymt a mol tsu zayn a meylekh

in a vaytn, vaytn land,
vu di beymer royshn freylekh
mentshn naket, on keyn shand...

Bin ikh naket geblibn af kremerdike rogn.

Un ikh troym nokh haynt a troym
Un s'iz mir gut:
Ikh betl bloyz a bisl mut
Un kh'pruv arunterbrekhn yede tsoym...
Un ikh vil mayn troym keynem nit zogn.⁵¹

Once upon a time, I dreamed
of being a miller in a windmill
behind a distant hill in a lush valley
where rivulets whisper quietly...

A breeze carried my dream away.

Once upon a time I dreamed of
being a king

in a far off land
where trees rustle joyfully
and people frolic naked, without any
shame...

But I remained behind naked in
shop corners

And the dream I dream today
still emboldens me:
I am asking for just a little courage
As I try to break down barriers...
And I do not want to reveal my
dream to anyone.

Despite the speaker's Edenic fairytale, in the end he reconciles himself to the differences between dream and reality, individual desire and collective responsibility. In its penultimate line, he steps forward to commit to becoming a force for social change in challenging times, even if it means that he must temporarily mute his private fantasy of escape into frivolity.

Similarly, in "Samson" Glik found inspiration in the Biblical hero as a model of national endurance in the face of mockery by one's enemies. Glik sought to steel his readers in the face of the threats from Nazi Germany and outbreaks of nationalist anti-Semitism at home by recalling earlier models of Jewish her-

47 Perets Miranski, "A bisl Shnipeshek," ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

48 Moyshe Blit, "Oytobiografiye," ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

49 Yitskhok Demb, "A shabes baytog bay Lezyer Volfn," ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

50 Blit, "Oytobiografiye," ms., Leyzer Ran Archive. *Literarishe bleter* was Warsaw's review of Yiddish literature and culture.

51 Hirsh Glik, "A mol," *Yungvald* 1 (January 1939), 2.

oism.⁵² In the end, it is not Samson's voice that dominates the poem, but rather that of its contemporary speaker:

O, held! Tsu dir mayne greste loybn!
Ikh shtey vi du mit gekovete hent,
Nor s'tliet a funk fun letstn gloybn
Un unter mir der shayter brent...
Nor fremd iz mir di shrek,
Es zingt in mir a yeder ever...
Velt! Oyb kh'vel avek,
Vel ikh dikh mitshlepn in keyver.⁵³

O hero, my greatest praise to you!
I stand like you with shackled hands
The spark of my faith still glows
while beneath me the pyre burns...
But fear is a stranger to me,
Each limb sings in me...
World! If I am on the way out,
I'm dragging you with me to the grave!

Glik's defiance positioned him well for his wartime role in crafting a poetics of resistance. Well before he joined the Jewish partisans of the Vilne Ghetto during the Nazi occupation of his city, his apprenticeship in Yungvald had provided him with the confidence and disposition of a communal leader. It was the camaraderie and cultural confidence fostered by Volf between 1937-1939 that contributed to Glik's understanding of what it meant for a poet to serve one's people in challenging times. In 1940, when the rest of Europe was in the midst of war and the city's Jews were adjusting themselves to their new Soviet, then Lithuanian rulers, he completed a poem in honor of Vilne's martyred son Hirsh Lekert⁵⁴ who was hanged in 1902 after standing up for the rights of Jewish workers. Then, during the years of Nazi occupation, he offered up tributes to the murdered resistance fighters Itsik Vitenberg (who headed the United Partisan Organization in the ghetto) and to Vitka Kempner, a female partisan who helped to blow up a German military transport near the city in 1942.⁵⁵ Glik, who only returned occasionally to the ghetto from his assignment as a hard laborer at a work camp, would regularly read for ghetto youth and present his newest writings at gatherings of the literary union. On one such occasion in May 1943 to mark "springtime in Yiddish literature" he unveiled his most enduring work, "Zog nisht keynmol"⁵⁶ (Never Say Never). Glik delivered the lyrics as a march, setting them to a familiar melody by Russian composer Dmitri Pokrass, giving birth to what would eventually come to be known as "The Partisan Hymn." Word of the poem spread quickly from the underground resistance, raising morale and encouraging defiance and self-defense. Though Glik was murdered in the summer of 1944, Yungvald had given birth to its own folk hero.

52 The source for the Samson legend can be found in the biblical Book of Judges 13-16. Samson's supernatural strength was given to him by God by virtue of his status as a Nazarite. He loses his powers when his hair is shorn at the instruction of his lover Delilah, which allows his capture by the Philistines. His enemies blind him and seek to make a spectacle of him, but when he is brought to one of their temples after his hair has had a chance regrow, he appeals to God to remember him. He pulls two of its columns together, bringing down the temple on himself and his opponents. Glik was not alone in looking to Samson as a source for Jewish heroism. The revisionist Zionist leader Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky wrote a Hebrew novel about the Biblical figure in 1927 in an effort to draw followers to his political ideology.

53 Hirsh Glik, "Shimshn," *Yungvald* 2 (February 1939), 3.

54 Lekert, a folk hero for Vilne Jewry, was a young revolutionary who attempted to assassinate the Russian governor of Vilna in May 1902 after the governor flogged Jewish demonstrators from the Bund. He was convicted and hanged in public the following month.

55 See "Shtil di nakht iz oysgeshternt," Glik, *Lider un poemes*, (New York: YKUF, 1953), 59-60.

56 Reprinted in Glik, *Lider un poemes*, 62. An English translation is available in David Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1988), 445-486: "Never say, this is the last road for you,/leaden skies are masking days of blue./The hour we yearn for is drawing near,/Our step will beat the signal: we are here./... Tomorrow's sun will gild our sad today,/The enemy and yesterday will fade away./But should the dawn delay or sunrise wait too long,/then let all future generations sing this song./This song was written with our blood and not with lead,/This is no song of free birds flying overhead,/But a people amid crumbling walls did stand,/They stood and sang this song with rifles held in hand."

Singing of the poem became a staple of post-war commemorative gatherings of Holocaust survivors and fighters. For more of Glik's poetry composed between 1938-1943, see both Glik, *Lider un poemes* (cited above) and Mark Dvorzhetski, *Hirshke Glik* (Paris: Underzkiyum, 1966).

Yungvald and the Post-War Myth of Nusekh Vilne

Despite the enthusiasm generated by the emergence in 1939 of a new Yiddish literary magazine for local aspiring writers, not everyone was convinced that they could save Eastern European Jewish culture from the politics that threatened to consume it. At a March 1939 evening sponsored by Yung-Vilne in honor of the publication of Leyzer Volf's newest poetic volume, *Shvartse Perl (Black Pearls)*, the community leader Joseph Tshernikhov offered the enigmatic anecdote of a survivor of the Titanic who claimed that as the ship was going down a steward approached him demanding payment for his bill. Tshernikhov looked out at the stunned hall and remarked: "Even in stormy times we must cover the accounts of Yiddish literature."⁵⁷ Tshernikhov betrayed the profound despair of the community at this moment: it had no choice but to continue to celebrate its cultural accomplishments, though history might look back at them as passengers on a doomed ship. By contrast, Avrom Reyzin—separated by an ocean in New York and somewhat immune from the political climate in Poland that colored the perspective of Volf and Tshernikhov—was far more optimistic. He viewed Yungvald as evidence of Yiddish creative continuity at a time when the Yiddish scene in New York found itself victim to mounting disinterest on the part of the children of immigrants. Upon receiving the first two issues of the group's magazine he published an excited review in New York's *Feder*: "Yungvald, published by the very youngest associates of Yung-Vilne, is more than a delightful publication. It is a message of good tidings... evidence that Yung-Vilne has already has a nurtured a Yungvald—a forest of young saplings... May the forest bloom, may its true song and rustle through its green leaves."⁵⁸ In New York, Yungvald was greeted a sign of hope that European center of Yiddish culture had the internal capacities to regenerate itself. In the end, it was the action of Leyzer Volf himself that put a premature end to the official gatherings of the group when he decided to follow Soviet troops in retreat from their occupation of Vilne in October 1939. He hoped to reunite with his sister across the border, and escape the air of uncertainty that the new Lithuanian regime was sure to bring to the city's Jewish life. Though Volf's Yung-Vilne colleagues Sutzkever and Miranski initially attempted to fill the gap produced by Volf's sudden absence in the fall of 1939, the pressures of war just across the border in Poland could not sustain the group's cohesion. As Blit recalls, the last time Yungvald gathered at Volf's apartment "was extremely difficult. We all kissed, and went our own way."⁵⁹

57 Sh. Dv. "Lekoved Leyzer Volfs ershtn bukh", *Undzer tog* (7 April 1939), 4.

58 A. Reyzin, "Yungvald," *Feder: zamlbukh* (New York, 1939), 107-108. Republished in *Yungvald* 4 (April 1939), 6. In an obituary for Volf published in 1949, Reyzin referred to Volf in neo-Hasidic terms, calling him a Rebbe to young writers. See "Vilne un irer a groyser dikhter, Leyzer Volf," *Yoyul-heft: Der gayst fun Vilne lebt 40 yor in Amerike* (New York, 1949), 22.

59 Moyshe Blit, "Oytobiografiye", ms., Leyzer Ran Archive. Blit followed Volf to Belarussia a week later, and then traveled with him to Moscow. They separated soon after.

To mark the year anniversary of the Soviet march into Vilne which precipitated Volf's decision to leave them, Hirsh Glik composed "The Night of September 1939."

...O, I will remember those nights in your home for all eternity.

The smoky gas lamp casting its pale light,
A sacred quiver in our eyes.
I will never forget the fire of your wolfish expression
The silent joy, and the feverish squirming of our souls.

A redeemer stands by the gates of the city
Waiting. He will enter at sunrise.
He is taking his initial steely step
And we see how the night comes pouring in.

The lamp flickers. You speak. Your word – an emboldening stroke

Once across the Soviet border, Leyzer Volf eventually made his way to Uzbekistan in attempt to avoid the fighting. He succumbed to starvation and typhoid in the winter of 1943, though not before he had gathered enough new material to allow for the posthumous publication of a collection of wartime lyrics about Nazism.⁶⁰ Upon hearing of his death, Leyzer Ran penned a private tribute from Samarkand, where he too was a war refugee. It concluded with the memory of better days and a defiant claim: "Bohemian Snipeshok!⁶¹ Stay true to the truth of the dream. May your bones rest, Leyzer. We stride onward to victory."⁶²

We began this essay by talking about the ways in which, after the war, Ran situated himself at the center of promoting and ingathering testimonies that might perpetuate *Nusekh Vilne*, the city's collective myth of its own cultural exceptionalism. One of these actions was his planned fifth and final commemorative issue of *Yungvald*.⁶³ Ran wrote to the group's surviving members in Israel, and invited other well-known writers with a connection to Vilne to contribute as well. Daniel Tsharni,⁶⁴ for instance, responded with delight to Ran's plans by using the occasion to retroactively reflect on the role of Vilne as a Yiddish literary center. In the same way that Ran had expanded the definition of Yung-Vilne to include an entire interwar generation of Yiddish creativity, so too did Tsharni interpret Yungvald as a symbol for creative dynamism that was much deeper than the small group that Volf had mentored between 1937-1939:

I am happy to have been a member of a Yungvald for almost 50 years, since the moment when Shmuel Niger proclaimed the renaissance of Yiddish literature in Vilne. Fifty years ago, on the eve of Hanukah 1907, I published my first poem in a journal edited by H.D. Nomberg. At that time, Vilne gave birth to its first Yungvald, which included [Shmuel] Niger, [A] Vayter, [Perets] Hirshbeyn, Dovid Aynhorn, and others. [Y.L.] Peretz was more than a little upset that Vilne had begun to compete with Warsaw [as a literary center]...Thirty years later, in 1937, I was privileged again to see the rise of a new generation...It is a wonder that after this greatest of tragedies the remaining members of Yung-Vilne and Yungvald who are dispersed over many continents continue in the creative path Nusekh Vilne. Their model constitutes the seeds of survival for the annihilation of our

For those born at dawn...

Dear Leyzer, today I read one of your sonnets
And my memory was set ablaze.

Glik contrasts the Soviet desire to bring political "redemption" to Lithuania by force against the spiritual redemption inherent in cultural fellowship. According to Glik, the first inevitably summons in darkness under the guise of bringing light, whereas the second allows for ultimate truths to emerge from hidden corners of the soul. At the same time that Glik's lyric sought to honor a beloved teacher, it functioned as a courageous act of resistance to the Soviet reoccupation of Vilne in the summer of 1940 that brought with it the systematic closure of all sources of independent Yiddish publishing. See Glik, "Di nakht fun September nayntsn-nayn-un-draysik," *Lider un poemes*, 51.

60 *Di broyne bestye* [The Brown Beast], (Moscow: Der emes, 1943).

61 Snipeshok was the Vilne neighborhood in which Volf lived and that was the home base to many writers from Yung-Vilne and Yungvald.

62 May 16, 1943, ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

63 Ran's archive contains a three page typed document listing the planned contents of commemorative issue of *Yungvald* that he hoped to publish in 1957. Its table of contents includes biographies and memoirs of Leyzer Volf, Hirsh Glik, Moyshe Gurin, Moyshe Rabinovitch, and Yitskhok Vidutshinski, and poems about Yungvald and its members.

64 Tsharni, poet, essayist, journalist, and brother of the well-known literary critic Shmuel Niger, lived in Vilne as a young adult. See Tsharni, *Vilne: memuar* (1951) and *A litvak in Poyln* (1955).

Yiddishland. As the Vilne Gaon once said: "Struggle, and you too can become a genius."⁶⁵

Others, such as Yung-Vilne's Perets Miranski responded to Ran's invitation by constructing their own lyrical matseyve (gravemarker) for lost comrades, as when he invoked Glik's lyrics from "Never Say Never" in his collective elegy "Yungvald":

Yungvald was chopped down
With axes...
Only a few managed to escape the blade.
But we go forth proudly, in tact,
because of Hirskhe's final poem.
'Never say you have reached the end of the road!'

A thousand times we were crowned with
Treason and force.
A thousand times we fell and died from the bite of the snake.
Yet even today, when our language is dragged
To the sacrificial alter-
Never say never...

Yungvald was chopped down,
And only its melody remains.
We bear it to distant shores.
But we march down the same highway
And carry with us its greeting:
'Never say...'⁶⁶

Moyshe Gurin's commemorative verse was somewhat more mystical in its tone, evoking the Biblical bush that was not consumed to interpret the realities of recent history:

If only our fire had burned
Like at that wonderful bush.
Instead, only our needles remain behind, like golden violin strings,
A reminder that our forest once sang...⁶⁷

Both Miranski and Gurin adopted a musical metaphor in writing about Yungvald in order to impress their hope that the refinement of spirit articulated in the group's creativity would outlast the premature and unnatural destruction of its members. If art is truly eternal, then Yiddish Vilne will live in the lyrics that its poets left behind.

Lest Ran's own investment in nurturing the myth of *Nusekh Vilne* color our reading of Yiddish literary history with hagiographic overtones, we would best remind ourselves of the sobering comments of historian Lucy Dawidowicz who, influenced by her experiences as a visiting international graduate fellow at the

65 Daniel Tsharni, "Lomir mekhadesh zayn di levone afn Vilner shlosberg," ts., Leyzer Ran Archive. Tsharni ends with a famous quote attributed to the city's revered rabbinic master Elijah ben Solomon, the Gaon of Vilne (1720-1797): "Vil nor, vest oykh zayn a goen." It is a play on the city's name (Vilne sounds similar to vil nor, which means "if you will it"). Tsharni associates a rebirth of Yiddish literature in Vilne with the publication there of *Literarische monatschrift* in 1908. See the chapter on Shmuel Niger in Barry Trachtenberg, *The Revolutionary Roots of Modern Yiddish 1903-1917* (Syracuse University Press, 2008), 82-107.

66 Perets Miranski, "Yungvald," *Shuros shire*. (Tel Aviv: Peretz farlag, 1974), p. 36. See also Miranski's "Snipeshok" and "Di balade fun Hirshke Glik un dem Snipeshker rov" in Miranski, *A Likht far a groshn* (Montreal, 1951) and "The Street of the Seven Poets," in Miranski, *Between Smile and Tear: The Poems and Poetic Fables of Peretz Miransky* (Vilnius: Versus Aureus, 2006).

67 Reprinted in Moyshe Gurin, "Yungvald," *Di grine brik* (Tel Aviv: Peretz farlag, 1966), 14.

city's YIVO Institute in 1938 and 1939, suggests:

The kind of Yiddish cultural life I was looking for didn't exist. I had thought that Vilna might become a center for modern secular Yiddish culture, where the finest achievements of Western art and civilization could be blended with the world of Yiddish. It was a naive expectation. Just as I realized that Yiddish flourished in Vilna for the wrong reasons, because of Polish anti-Semitism and Polish economic backwardness, so I came to realize that Vilna was too weak and poor to sustain the ideal culture I was searching for.⁶⁸

Could one read the brief history of Yungvald as evidence of Dawidowicz's thesis? The group's magazine did not have the communal support to survive more than four months, and even its mentor was an active member of a political organization that concluded that Jewish life could not be sustained in Eastern Europe under the current political and economic conditions. On the other hand, the very existence of a Yungvald in 1939 demonstrated the resistance of local Yiddish culture to the nihilism that could have arisen given the political conditions. Leyzer Volf and his friends in Yung-Vilne understood that they had a responsibility to ensure that theirs was not the last generation of Yiddish writers in Vilne, a city that prided itself on its cultural pedigree. Though the Second World War denied Yungvald the opportunity to fully ripen, it nonetheless gave birth to one of the most dynamic voices of the Vilne Ghetto in the person of Hirsh Glik, and contributed figures who would become part of the organizational force behind the expression of Yiddish in the State of Israel in the form of the group Yung-Yisroel. At the very least, a journey through the Ran archive provides us with a rich documentary glimpse into a time and place when Yiddish was still young, inviting us to make our own determinations about both its achievements, its anxieties, and the ways in which its tragic end emboldened its survivors to transform what might have been a fleeting literary moment into the larger narrative myth of *Nusekh Vilne*.