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VILNA: THE JERUSALEM OF LITHUANIA--BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Master of Sacred Music Degree

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INTRODUCTION

The ancient city of Vilna, "the Jerusalem of Lithuania,"[1] was filled with mythology, legend and history. It was the heart of both a great religious tradition and a vibrant secular culture.

Two contrasting ways of life and thought were centered in this historic city. It was the home of one of the most celebrated Jewish religious leaders, the Gaon of Vilna, who introduced a method of study from the secular sciences that he then integrated into the study of bible and talmud. At the same time, writers such as S.(Shloyme) An-Ski and Chaim Grade, struggled with their early religious training while trying to create a new synthesis incorporating secular ideas. In the city of Vilna, Jewish religious training was an important part of secular education, and the sciences were recognized as essential to the understanding and interpretation of texts.

Rather than fostering opposition within the communities of Vilna, these polarities were not only able to co-exist but drew on one another's strengths to create a rich composite of philosophy and art. It is precisely these conflicting yet interrelated dynamics that captured my interest.

S. Ansky's play "The Dybbuk," premiered by the Vilna Troupe in Warsaw in

[1]Lucy S. Dawidowicz, From That Place and Time - A Memoir, 1938-1947, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1989), 37.

1920, was originally entitled "Between Two Worlds."[2] In the film, the character possessed by the dybbuk was between the spiritual and the mundane, but "between two worlds" also serves as a metaphor for the relationship between the religious and secular worlds. I see this as a fascinating element in the image of Vilna as one of the major centers of Jewish learning and tradition. These groups--religious and secular, old and new--met, clashed and intertwined in Vilna, creating the richness that gave vitality to the "Jerusalem of Lithuania"--*Yerushalayim de-Lita*.[3]

In this paper, I will begin with a historical background of the formation of Vilna as a city--politically, culturally, and sociologically. The religious movements in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially the appearance of the charismatic leader the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), present a backdrop for the musical development of the cantorate in Lithuania. Through the Vilna Gaon, followers of traditional religious scholarship were introduced to scientific forms and modern ideas. This helped to carve the path to Enlightenment in Vilna and make way for musical innovations in the synagogue. In particular, cantor and composer Abraham Moses Bernzteyn will be discussed, as well as Chayim Wasserzug and Jakov Goldstein, father of Cantor Israel Goldstein, Director of the School of Sacred Music, Hebrew Union College--

[2]Meir Ronnen, "The Man Between Two Worlds," Jerusalem Post International Edition, 2 April 1994, 14-15.

[3]This transliteration and all subsequent Hebrew and Yiddish words follow spellings as found in Encyclopaedia Judaica.

Jewish Institute of Religion.

My discussion of the secular world explores some of the influential Vilna poets and writers of the 1920's and 30's, such as Moshe Kulbak and Chaim Grade of the *Yung Vilne*, and S.An-Ski, author of "The Dybbuk." They and others contributed to the legacy and memories of the people of this city and the surrounding cities who were victims of the Shoah. Finally, I will attempt to explore the meeting of religious tradition and secular culture, to illustrate how Jewish life in Vilna nestled "between two worlds."

My personal interest in studying Lithuania stems, in part, from my own ancestry. Raised in a traditional Jewish home, my father, Yehuda Bernstein (1911-1989), was born in Shkud (Skuodas) northwest of Kovno, on the Baltic coast. Later known as Julian Bern, my father was a pianist, composer and teacher. His brother, Dr. Leon Bernstein, was a mathemetician and poet who taught in Vilna and joined the partisans in the forest during World War II. One of their partisan leaders and a close friend, Ilya Sheinboim, was among the first resistance fighters to die in the Vilna Ghetto. My father's uncle, Abraham Lekus, was a rabbi who left Lithuania to serve a community in Switzerland, while his great-great-great grandfather, Eliezar Rokeach of Brody (in Galicia, on the outskirts of Lithuania), left eastern Europe to serve as the Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam in 1735.

I initially began this project when I lived in Jerusalem during the 1991-1992 academic year at Hebrew Union College. I considered traveling to Vilna that

summer, but was unfortunately not able to do so at that time. I know it is a pilgrimage I will make some day. During the summer of 1993, I studied Advanced Yiddish in the YIVO Summer Program at Columbia University, made possible by the Uriel Weinreich Scholarship. I read prose and poetry by the writers of *Yung Vilne*, attended classes and lectures in Yiddish and began to discover some of the literary wealth that had been stored and nurtured in Vilna. As I approach my Investiture in the Cantorate, I realize that this paper is a reflection of my struggle to unite the past with the present, and my attempts to integrate the religious and secular worlds of which I am a part.

In my efforts to define myself "between two worlds," I have found, in reflecting on the disappearance of the Jewish city of Vilna, that its image is still very much alive in the hearts and minds of many. Amidst the endless wealth of materials I continue to discover and explore, the presentation in this paper can only be a small segment of the embodiment of that which was Vilna, a vital and magical city.

CHAPTER ONE

Background of Vilna

By Wilja's stream and murmuring Wilenka
Enchanted, of the wolf of iron dreamed;
And wakening, by the god's command it seemed,
Built Vilna city like a wolf that broods
Mid bears and boars and bison in the woods.

According to Lithuanian legend, Vilna was founded by the Grand Duke Gedemin, who was the ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the early part of the fourteenth century. In a dream he had while hunting near the site that would become Vilna, Gedemin saw a howling wolf with an iron shield. As interpreted to him by his bard, the wolf and the shield represented a mighty fortress near a great city to arise. Gedemin thus built his castle on the highest hill between two rivers, the Wilja and the Wilenka,[4] and named the city Vilna after them. This legend was captured by Poland's greatest poet, Adam Mickiewicz, in his patriotic epic, *Pan Tadeusz*,[5] which includes the above poem.

A Historical Overview

Vilna, pronounced "Vilnius" in Lithuanian and "Wilno" in Polish, was originally

[4]Pronounced "Vilya" and "Vileika."

[5]Dawidowicz, 29.

the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1323. It became a Polish city when Lithuania and Poland were united as one kingdom by the Union of Lublin in 1569. In 1772 it was partitioned under Russian rule and between 1918 and 1920, Vilna was ruled successively by the Lithuanians, Russians, and finally the Poles. Vilna remained under Polish rule until 1939 when Poland was invaded by the German and Soviet armies and then, for a few months, Vilna again became part of Lithuania. It was annexed by the Soviet Union in June of 1940 and occupied by the Nazis one year later.[6]

According to the writer Narbutt who wrote a history of Vilna, there was already a large Jewish community in Vilna during the reign of the Lithuanian chief Gedemin (1316-41). In fact, the streets inhabited by Jews were about one-fifth of the area of the entire city. Archival records show evidence of a Jewish community only since the second half of the sixteenth century.[7] According to these records, a community was considered legitimate only if it was represented by a rabbi. Vilna had not just one, but several rabbis--another indication of its considerable size. There are numerous accounts of Jews living in Vilna before the sixteenth century, but their numbers were not significant. The first evidence of an "organized Jewish community" in Vilna dates from 1568, when it was

[6]Universal Jewish Encyclopaedia, (New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopaedia, 1942), s.v. "Vilna" by Alexander Hafftka.

[7]The Jewish Encyclopedia, ed. Isadore Singer, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc.,1901) s.v."Wilna."

ordered to pay the local poll tax.[8] Records indicate that less than twenty years later, in 1592, the street next to the synagogue was called "Jews' Street."

In 1593 Jewish trading and residence privileges in Vilna were renewed by the Polish king, Sigismund II. Barely seventy years earlier, under Sigismund I, townspeople had obtained the right to prevent Jewish settlement in Vilna. Despite the restrictions, a number of Jewish residents lived in Vilna during the middle of the sixteenth century. Finally, in 1633, the Jews of Vilna were granted a charter allowing them full commercial rights; only their "place of residence" remained restricted. They were also granted permission to build a new stone synagogue.

The original synagogue, made of wood, was constructed in 1592. The only stipulations for the synagogue were that it could not be taller than any other buildings in the vicinity or resemble in any way a church or a monastery.[9] To achieve the desired interior height, a deep foundation was built for the synagogue so that its floor was below street level. Known as the Town Synagogue[10] it received the title of the "Great Synagogue" (see Figure 1). The

[8]Cecil Roth and Geoffry Wigoder, eds. Enyclopaedia Judaica, (Jerusalem Maxwell-Macmillan-Keter Ltd., 1992), s.v. "Vilna" by Israel Klausner, Israel O.Lehman, Ari Hoogenboom. All subsequent footnotes pertaining to encyclopedias will be abbreviated as follows: Encyclopaedia Judaica (EJ), Universal Jewish Encyclopedia (UJE), and The Jewish Encyclopedia (JE).

[9]Dawidowicz, 41. This was not unusual for "ecclesiastical" laws throughout Europe at that time.

[10]The Town Synagogue is sometimes referred to by its Yiddish name,

building so impressed Napolean on his retreat from Moscow in 1812, that he referred to Vilna as "The Jerusalem of Lithuania."

"Jews' Street" or *ulica Zydowska* (called *yidishe gas* by the Jews), came to be the heart of the Jewish quarter in Vilna.[11] This "heart" was actually in the shape of a triangle; Jews were permitted to live on just three streets.

There were specific regulations regarding the number of Jewish-owned shops. Their windows could not open onto the main streets. Instead they faced inward toward the Jewish streets. There were, however, never a "walled ghetto" or gates that locked at night at any time in Vilna's history. Only under the Nazis was the Jewish community in Vilna subjected to ghetto confinement.

The city of Vilna grew during the first half of the seventeenth century due to newcomers from Prague, Frankfurt and numerous Polish towns hoping for a better financial situation. They included wealthy merchants and scholars as well as artisans and traders. With a total population of 15,000, Jewish residents numbered 3,000. Yet economic strain on Lithuania following the Chmielnicki pogroms in 1648, and the threat of the approaching Muscovite armies, resulted in a decline of "Jewish" Vilna. Not until 1661, when the Polish army recaptured the city and the Jewish community slowly began to rebuild, did the leadership of Lithuanian Jewry pass to Vilna.

In the early part of the eighteenth century there was little improvement for the

Shtot Shul.

[11]Dawidowicz, 40.

Jews who had to contend with financial burdens from the Northern War, in addition to plague and famine. In 1783, restrictions were lifted by the royal court, giving Jews residential and trading rights. This did not last long, however, and only ten years later Vilna was annexed by Russia--the second of the Polish partitions. In 1794, many Jews supported the Poles in an uprising against the Russians and the Prussians. However, the Polish general, Thaddeus Kosciuszko (who had fought on the side of the Americans during the American Revolution), was defeated. Poland was divided up among its neighbors in a third partition. There were approximately 3,600 Jews living in Vilna at this time.

The Eighteenth Century

Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Vilna had become a center for many famous rabbinic scholars from Bohemia and the western German lands. The most famous of all the rabbinic scholars who contributed to Vilna's prominence in religious and spiritual history was Elijah ben Solomon Zalmen (1720-1797), who was known simply as the Vilna Gaon or *Ha GRA*, the abbreviation of *haga'on rabbi eliyahu*. He was a descendent of a long line of scholars, but he made his reputation as a child prodigy after delivering a Talmudic lecture in the Great Synagogue in Vilna at the age of seven.[12]

[12]UJE, Vol. 4, 76. Other sources say six, and that Abraham Katzenellenbogen, the rabbi of Brest-Litovsk took him to study with Moses Margalioth of Keidany when he was seven.

There are countless stories, anecdotes and legends about the Vilna Gaon. He apparently never forgot anything he learned. He had, for example, instant recall of 2500 volumes of scriptures. While his intellectual powers were astounding, he did require time to assimilate the accumulated knowledge that preceded him. When his own sister came to visit after not having seen him for many years, he is reported to have said, "excuse me, my dear sister, but I cannot waste my precious time on such idle chatter. I still have so much to accomplish in this transitory world and every minute must be utilized. When we'll meet again in the hereafter, we'll have more time to talk."[13]

Elijah Gaon came from a well-known family of rabbis and scholars. He worked mainly on his own and therefore was not forced into the conventional talmudic study modes of his day. He studied not only Torah, Oral Law, and Kabbalah but also astronomy, geometry, algebra, and geography in order to enhance the understanding of talmudic discussion and argumentation.[14] He was meticulous with Hebrew grammar and also incorporated his knowledge of music into his teaching.[15]

In this sense, The Vilna Gaon not only lived "between two worlds," but managed to integrate them. He led an intensely private, hermitic existence, with

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[13]Samuel Vigoda, Legendary Voices, vol. I (New York: M.P.Press Inc., 1981), 377.

[14]E.J. Vol.6. His study of astronomy was to better understand the Jewish calendar cycle.

[15]UJE, 77.

only a select number of pupils who studied Hebrew grammar, bible, and mishnah with him. These subjects tended to be neglected by the Talmudists of his day. He stressed the importance of scientific as well as traditional study methods. The Gaon believed that "secular disciplines are necessary to unlock the vault of Torah in order to reveal the wisdom stored in it."[16] He was regarded as a legendary figure in his own time, and was said to be the "last theologian of classical rabbinism."[17]

The Vilna Gaon was not at all active in public affairs until the wave of Hasidism began to wash over Eastern Europe in the early part of the eighteenth century. Under The Gaon's leadership, Vilna became the center of the crusade against the spread of Hasidism. Its followers were known as the *Mitnagdim* or the "opposition." Although he was interested in the study of Kabbalah, he considered it wrong for it to take precedence over Halakhic studies. The opposition intensified with the introduction of new rites and customs brought about by Hasidism.

The Vilna Gaon also studied the *Te'amim*, the *trope* or graphic signs of Torah reading.[18] He took the generally accepted translations of the *te'amim* and

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[16]Norman Lamm, Torah Umadda (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1990) 46.

[17]UJE, 77.

[18]Moshe Schonfeld, "The Vilna Gaon's Interpretations of the Te'amim (Selections) "Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy, vol.V, 40-42.

applied them to explanations of Torah verses. Each *ta'am*,[19] according to the Vilna Gaon, has a very specific meaning. His explanations are fascinating and deepen understanding of the biblical texts.

Two examples demonstrate the Gaon's insights. First, in Exodus 1:4 it is written, "...And they made their lives bitter..." וימררו את - חייהם The te'amim "kadma-v'azla" individually mean "forward," "ahead," (kadma), and "gone, went or left, as in a place" (v'azla), that is to say, the meaning of the tropes convey they left ahead of schedule. Indeed this is true since in Genesis 15:3 the order of God was that the Jews were to remain in Egypt for four hundred years. However, due to the hardships under Egyptian rule, they left after only two hundred and ten years, almost two hundred years earlier.[20] Second, in Exodus 30:15 it says הרבה - לא העשיר "The rich shall not give more..," using the te'amim "munach" (resting) and "revi'i" (fourth in sequence or a quarter.) According to the Talmud (Ket.50a), Rabbi Elai stated: "It was ordained at Usha that if a man wishes to give charity, he should not spend more than one-fifth of his possessions since by spending more, he might himself come to be in need." After giving away one-fifth he should stop (munach) at the remaining four portions (revi'i).[21]

[19]Individual trope sign.

[20]Schonfeld, 41.

[21]Ibid.

Elijah Gaon's advocacy of scientific studies, whether rabbinic or secular, prepared the ground for planting the seeds of the Haskalah Movement in Vilna. The ideas that began in Berlin with the "father of the Haskala,"[22] Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), and spread through Jewish scholars in Galicia, finally took root in Vilna. It is interesting to note that the life spans of The Vilna Gaon and Moses Mendelssohn corresponded very closely.

Parallel to the religious movements, two "worlds" or streams of Hazzanut were developing in Europe toward the end of the eighteenth century. The first, centered in western Europe, and focused on "reformation," accompanied the Haskala movement. The second, tied to tradition and self-preservation was called "chasidut." The reformers were concerned with *sechel* or knowledge, and their goal was form and aesthetics, whereas the traditionalists concentrated on *gefil*--feeling and emotion.[23] Chapter two will explore the Cantorate in Vilna.

The Nineteenth Century

Equally strong as religious Jewish scholarship in Vilna was the development of secular scholarship, schools, organizations, and culture. We will see, again,

[22]Robert Seltzer, Jewish People, Jewish Thought,The Jewish Experience in History (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1980), 558.

[23]Isascher Fater, "Abraham Moshe Bernzteyn" in Jewish Music in Poland Between the Two World Wars, (Tel Aviv: Velt federatsye fun Poilishe Yidn, 1970), 60-72.

that there was never a complete separation of one world from the other. The religious world of the Vilna Gaon was influenced by the secular world of science and music, and the secular world drew from traditional religious sources.

There were many intellectuals, artists and modern Hebrew and Yiddish writers who contributed to Vilna's rich secular world. Many Hebrew writers were attracted to Vilna because it was an important center of the *Haskala*. They became known as the *Maskilim*–the "enlighteners." The "Russification"[24] policy of the Jews by the nineteenth-century government used Vilna as a base for its activies; for example, in 1842 Max Lilienthal was authorized to facilitate the establishment of modern schools, while a rabbinical seminary sponsored by the government was founded in 1847, which was transformed into a Jewish teachers' seminary in 1871.[25] Vilna became a center for well-known Hebrew and Yiddish publishing and printing houses, with the establishment of the first printing house in 1799 by Leib and Gershon Luria. The early nineteenth century *maskilim* had been inspired by the Polish language and culture whereas in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Russian influence dominated. Some of the *maskilim* of this period included Mordecai Aaron Guenzberg (1795-1846), and such poets as Judah Loeb Gordon and Eliakum Zunser (1845-1913), who became one of the most reknowned bards or *badchen* of Eastern Europe.

Mathias Strashun (ca.1817-1885) studied under a leading maskil and also in

[24]EJ, Vol 16, 144.

[25]UJE, "Vilna," 423.

the yeshiva of Volozhin. A descendent of Cantor Joel David Strashunksy, better known as the Vilna Balebessel, Strashun was an "ardent bibliophile." His accumulated 7,000 volumes later became known as the Strashun Library, one of Jewish Vilna's famous landmarks. Samuel Joseph Fuenn (1818 -1890), a wealthy businessman as well as a scholar and writer of Hebrew and Russian, founded the first modern Jewish school in Vilna.

A number of the nineteenth-century Vilna-born writers later became famous in the United States. The first Yiddish daily in New York City, *Die Post*, was founded by Hirsch Gerschuni (1844-1897) in 1870. Abraham Cahan, born near Vilna in 1860, was the editor of the Yiddish daily, *Forward*, for many years. The musician, Leopold Godowski, who was born in 1870, came to New York in 1912, and Arno Nadel, born in Vilna in 1878, made a name for himself in Berlin.

At about the same time, in the mid-nineteenth century, a somewhat more radical movement developed amongst the *Mitnagdim* of Lithuania. The *musar* movement was started by Rabbi Israel Lipkin Salanter, who established his own yeshiva. *Musar* in Hebrew means both edification and chastisement.[26] It was the ideal approach as an alternative to Hasidism. Students in the *musar* yeshiva devoted as much time to spiritual purification as to their study of talmud. In chapter three, Chaim Grade, a student of the *musar* yeshiva and one of the foremost writers of *Yung Vilne*, will be discussed.

Through the Vilna Gaon, one of the most celebrated leaders in Jewish

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[26]Ibid., 127.

history, and Strashun and Fuenn, as well as figures yet to be introduced, we can see that the worlds existed side-by-side and were not truly separate--secular learning influenced the religious world and the scientific world was in turn influenced by the religious. These figures represent the two traditions which were of equal importance in Vilna--Talmudic learning and Haskalah. According to Lucy Davidowicz, these are the fundamental traditions which represented the mentality typical of the *litvak*--the Lithuanian Jew.[27] It is therefore significant that streets in the Jewish sections of Vilna were named after the Gaon as well as Strashun and Fuenn.

Vilna was also the seat of some of the earliest Zionist organizations, as well as the birthplace of the Jewish Socialist Movement in Europe as the doors gave way to the twentieth century. In 1897, Jewish workers in Russia and Poland united to form the *Yiddisher Arbiter Bund*. In 1905 during the first Russian revolution, new Socialist parties developed based on Zionist ideologies. The first Zionist organization was founded in Vilna in 1884 called *Hovevei Zion* or Lovers of Zion, and subsequently other Zionist groups were formed and numerous conferences were held there. An interesting contradiction is the fact that while early Zionism "drew on the beliefs and symbols of Judaism,"[28] modern Zionists were primarily secular and in Palestine itself Yiddish was long considered a negative element.

[27]Dawidowicz, 45.

[28]Ibid., 21.

Vilna in the Modern Era

By the late 1830's, the Jewish population in Vilna had grown to over 20,000. With the accession of Alexander II to the throne in 1855, conditions improved for most citizens in Russia, including the Jews. His assassination in 1881 and the reign of his son, Alexander III, were most likely responsible for the wave of pogroms and anti-semitic policies that caused the first major mass migration of Jews from Russia between 1881 and 1914.[29]

Although there were no pogroms in Vilna at that time, the Jews were nevertheless affected by the Czarist policies which continued up until World War I under the rule of Nicholas II, the son of Alexander III. And though many Jews had left Vilna by 1897, they still numbered 63,000--almost half the city's population.

In the years that followed, the Jews in Vilna (as well as elsewhere) flourished culturally, academically and artistically despite harsh economic and political struggles. They created a network of religious and educational institutions as well as newspapers, periodicals, and publications.[30] Even in the miserable conditions of the ghetto, clandestine education continued on both traditional and secular levels. Books were smuggled into makeshift libraries and archives, and

[29]Ibid., 48.

[30]Ibid., 50.

symphony orchestras and theatre groups performed regularly.

Zelig Kalmanovitch (1881-1944), scholar and writer and former YIVO director in Vilna, wrote an essay on the Vilna ghetto. He referred to the social, cultural and educational institutions of the ghetto as "the clear victory of spirit over matter."[31]

This brief historical overview illustrates how Vilna became an exciting crossroad of differing forces. Lucy Davidowicz describes this period as "a feverish flowering in the shadow of death." Not only was there a cultural struggle *between the two worlds* of the religious and secular, but "a fertilizing interplay of opposites" between tradition and modernity, the old and the new, Zionist and non-Zionist as well as Hebrew religious and Yiddish secular culture.

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[31]Lucy S.Dawidowicz, The War Against the Jews 1933-1945, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 351.

CHAPTER TWO

The Cantor in Vilna

In addition to being a center of religious and secular culture, Vilna was also considered one of the greatest centers of Hazzanut in Europe. Many great cantors contributed to the reputation of the synagogues in Vilna, and conversely the Vilna Jewish community became enamored with their hazzan who later left for greater fortune. The Vilna community went out of their way to do all they could for their hazzan and literally sang his praises to the highest degree. The cantor gained more and more fame until he was "lured" away by richer communities. Thus, explains Cantor Samuel Vigoda, none of the great cantors actually died or were buried in Vilna.[32]

Although there were cantors of more renown who sang in Vilna--most of whom continued their careers in the United States, such as Mordechai Hershman, Moshe Koussevitzky and Gershon Sirota--three in particular will be discussed in this chapter. The main focus will be on Abraham Moshe Berezteyn, who was one of the most prolific composers of Jewish music from that region; Chaim Wasserzug, also known as Chaim Lomzer, important because of his choral innovations; finally, the cantor whose career took a similar course as Wasserzug's (he, too, went from Vilna to London), was Jakov Goldstein, the

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[32]Vigoda, 367.

esteemed father of Cantor Israel Goldstein, Director of the School of Sacred Music in New York.

What features distinguished the Vilna Hazzanim from those of other cities in Europe? The Litvak, from the cold Baltic climate, was not recognized as passionate or emotional, features one would tend to associate with cantors, since singers are usually characterized as demonstrative and sentimental. The Litvak was seen as a *gebrutener, kalter, pahaner, trukener*[33]--(a cold, dry, calculating, unimpressionable, inanimate creature, with a good brain, a receptive mind, but no soul and no heart). Even their food characterized their mentality: unlike the Poles who put sugar in their gefilte fish, the Litvaks seasoned theirs with pepper, again indicating a quick but dry wit, lacking emotion.[34] Yet a Lithuanian singer, Masha Benya declares this to be a gross generalization, and that the Litvak was "simply not demonstrative!" Besides, she adds, "I make a mean floimen (plum) tsimmes, and without the fat!"[35]

Not only the rabbinic traditions were nourished in Vilna, but strict guidelines for Hazzanut and the role of the Hazzan acquired an equally important status. Synagogue policies cited the duties of the Hazzan in great detail. Apart from his main obligation of officiating at most Sabbath services and holidays, he was

[33]Ibid, 364.

[34]Dawidowicz, From that Place and Time, 47.

[35]Masha Benya-Matz, interview by author, Tape recording and notes. Forest Hills, New York, 1 July 1994.

expected to be at every morning and evening service, and to join the scholars in the *Beys Hamedrosh* in their daily studies of *Perek mishnaayos* and *Gemoro* (Talmud). Obviously, to be well-versed in *Halakha (* the Jewish laws of daily life and tradition) and to have a good Hebrew education was an essential prerequisite for the position of Hazzan. The Vilna Jewish community was equally concerned with the private life of their cantor and expected him to behave in a dignified and discerning manner so that there could be no cause for rumor or gossip.

The two main synagogues in Vilna were the Great Synagogue, originally called the Town Synagogue *(Shtot Shul),* and Taharat Hakodesh, the Choir Synagogue *(Khor Shul).* The Jews of Vilna claimed that simply for the privilege of having the opportunity to officiate in the Great Synagogue a cantor should actually have to pay them.[36] It was not only the awesome beauty of the architecture that gave the Great Synagogue its fame. The ceiling consisted of a row of giant white squares made of plaster. Their placement was designed to produce an excellent acoustic "echo of sound."[37] Thus cantors who did not possess particularly large voices succeeded in reaching those seated in the farthest corners of the sanctuary.

The services in the *Khor Shul* appear to have been less traditional than those of the Great Synagogue, since they were dominated by its choir. Modern

[36]Vigoda, 368.

[37]Ibid., 370.

compositions of the nineteenth century by Sulzer and Lewandowsky predominated there. It is interesting to see the extent to which this particular synagogue in eastern Europe was influenced by the musical traditions of Berlin and Vienna. It was in the *Khor Shul* that the prolific cantor-composer Abraham Moses Bernzteyn officiated from 1893 until his resignation some thirty years later.

Abraham Moshe Bernzteyn

Abraham Moshe Bernzteyn was born on *Tishah be-Av*, July 21, 1866, in Shatzk, a small town in the province of Minsk. His father was an amateur cantor, his mother died when he was only ten years old. At that time, after studying in *kheder* and yeshiva in Minsk, he was already an "enthusiast" of cantor Yisroelke Minsker der Khazan, who was known for his "sweet Hazzanut and exemplary diction".[38] In 1879, Bernzteyn entered the famous yeshiva in Mir, Poland. He spent the next few years searching for a reputable Hazzan to whom he could apprentice. Finally, upon his arrival in Kovno in 1884, he befriended Cantor Raphael Yehuda Rabinowitch.

Bernzteyn's musical personality was formed during this period while he studied classical music and *nusachot* as well as science. He also took voice lessons, but the problems of the Jewish people and their culture occupied his

[38]Albert Weisser, Abraham Moshe Bernzteyn, (New York: YIVO, 1969).

mind. This interest eventually led to his involvement in the Jewish Historic Ethno-graphic Society founded by Shmuel An-Ski. For four years Bernzteyn studied under Rabinowitch's wing. In 1884 he began composing some of his best known songs, *"Am Olam"* from a Hebrew text by Mordechai Tzvi Mane and *"Zamd un Shtern"* from the Yiddish text by Shimen Frug. These songs immediately became part of every Hazzan's concert repertoire, popular in Jewish communities throughout the world. The archaic, highly poetic text of *"Am Olam"* is heavy and dramatic but composed in the lyrical, romantic style of the late nineteenth century.

In 1888, Bernzteyn became the cantor at Adath Yeshurun in Bialystok, and the following year he was engaged as the choir master for Cantor Baruch Leib Rosowsky at the *Khor Shul* in Riga. In 1893, Bernzteyn took the position of Cantor at the Vilna *Khor Shul* (Taharat Hakodesh), where he remained for about thirty years.

Isaschar Fater explains that what Pinchas Minkovsky (1859-1924) started in Odessa, Bernzteyn continued in Vilna. Both of them tried to fuse the Haskalah Hazzanut of Sulzer (1804-1890) with the Hazzanut of Nisi Belzer-Spivak (1824-1906). They combined the order and aesthetic of Sulzer with the inner depth and spirituality of Belzer. Fater claims that both led Hazzanut to new horizons.[39]

Among his liturgical compositions are Bernzteyn's *"Ahavat Olam* "in E minor and *"Yismach Moshe"* in C minor. Regarding the latter, Isaschar Fater states

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[39]Fater, 61.

that it is "a masterpiece of a composition...the weaving of the intervals give sweetness and lightness whereas the antiphonous foundation supply originality and religious character."[40] I am not so sure I would label *"Yismach Moshe"* a masterpiece, but the recitative of the Hazzan demonstrates an expressive, chant-like quality whereas the choral sections are written in classical, partly fugal style. Bernzteyn's *"Adonai, Adonai"* in Bb, his most acclaimed work for cantor and choir, is an example of Hazzanut which employs *nusach* and traditional responses with four-part choir and organ accompaniment. Bernzteyn as well as other composers of his time, was influenced by innovations in the Reform Movement.

The first song, *"Zamd un Shtern,"* which Bernzteyn had written during his apprenticeship in Kovno, as well as *"Al Harri Tziyon,"* were published in 1900 in Vilna. Children's songs *"Hasheleg"* and *"Shirat Haaviv"* were published in Olam Katan the following year in Vienna. Three Yiddish songs were published in St. Petersburg in 1903: *"Hot Rakhmones," "Nokn Kishinever Pogrom"* (after a text by S. Frug), and *"Der Fraynd."*

In 1908, a music critic in a St. Petersburg publication wrote: "The compositions of A.M. Bernzteyn deserve close attention because of their religious ecstasy and the beauty of their oriental elements."[41]

Bernzteyn compiled nine notebooks of liturgical pieces, some for solo voice

[40]Ibid., 67.

[41]Quotation from the Albert Weisser biography of A.M. Bernzteyn (YIVO).

as well as three- and four-part choral arrangements. He also has numerous untitled collections, for example, a collection of synagogal works for cantor and choir. Bernzteyn's songs range from liturgical to secular in nature. Another of his untitled collections contains a number of Yiddish songs arranged for solo voice and four-part chorus, as well as some Hebrew songs. Many of the texts are by Shimen Frug. There are twelve notebooks of children's songs for one, two and three voices without piano accompaniment. He composed altogether fifty-five songs for adults and one hundered and fifty for children in both Hebrew and Yiddish. Acccording to Isaschar Fater, Bernzteyn's "*Tsum Hemerl*", written to a text by Avram Reisen and published in 1919, is one of the "pearls of musical choral repertoire."[42]

Bernzteyn published his Avodat Haboreh volumes I and II in 1914 for solo or cantor and choir. It was not until 1931, the year before he died, that he published the third volume. In his introduction to this work, Bernzteyn writes in a friendly and informal letter-like style which I have translated from Yiddish:

> After a long pause, I am presenting this new revised collection ofsynagogue compositions...I have decided to publish it in reduced form, so that it may be accessible for all hazzonim. I hope you will wholeheartedly accept this!
>
> I have numerous compositions from great composers of the previous generation such as Pinchas Minkovsky, David Novakovsky, Lewandowski, Erstler, Eduard Birnbaum, etc. all of which have not yet been published. Contemporary authors have promised to help me. A good portion of my compositions are still found in "k'tav yad"-[manuscript form].

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[42]Fater, 68.

> I hope to publish editions of Avodat Haboreh more often which will, hopefully, be of great help to khazzonim and will be a valuable treasure for Jewish religious services. This can only be possible, however, if everyone helps in the distribution of these note books--everyone within his own circle of well-known hazzonim and supporters.
>
> I still have a few copies of the first and second editions, which have been received with much acclaim by all cantors who have used them... Also available is my Musikalisher Pinkas, a collection of 243 folk nigunim for *shabbat zmirot, motzei shabbat, haggadah shel pesach, yom tov,* as well as *kohanim nigunim, lomdisher nigunim, hasidic* and *folk-nigunim* without words. The Musikalisher Pinkas is a valuable folk treasure which has great historical worth. Khazzonim can find interesting numbers to sing at "simchas"... Price: 7 zlotys, abroad: I dollar.
>
> It is also possible to order my well-known songs which are performed with much success at Yiddish/Jewish concerts: *"Al Har'rei Tsiyon," "Zamd un Shtern," "Am Olam"* and *"Tsum Hemerl,"* all with piano accompaniment.[43]

As we have learned from Bernzteyn himself, he considered his Musikalisher Pinkas, which appeared in 1927, a "valuable folk treasure" with great "historic" importance. Not surprisingly, Bernzteyn was active in the Vilna Jewish Historic Ethnographical Society. He attended the first meeting, held in the presence of its founder, Shmuel An-Ski, in 1919, as head of the music sector of the organization. An-Ski died the following year and at the memorial concert, on December 8, 1920, the choir was directed by A.M. Bernzteyn.

In the detailed notes to his collection of *niggunim* in the Musikalisher Pinkas, written in Yiddish, Bernzteyn explains their importance and place in Jewish folk art. In previous generations, it was not considered Halakhically accepted to write songs for "inyanei chol" but rather, the payetanim wrote only on the subject

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[43]A.M. Bernzteyn, Avodat Haboreh (Vilna, 1931?), introduction.

of religious themes.

Some of the melodies were taken from other cultures, depending on where Jews lived. It made a difference if they lived in cities or more rural areas. The sages objected to "borrowing" melodies, but in those times, Bernzteyn claims, there were very few Jewish composers.

In Bernzteyn's preface to the *lomdishe niggunim*, he describes how the yeshiva students would come together from different towns and sing, thereby exchanging their specific melodies of niggunim. He points out that, there was certainly no singing of secular, weekday *shirei khol* songs in the yeshivas.

However, something very interesting developed in the lomdisher yeshivot; a "special genre of *zmirot*" which was a mixture of verses of Torah, Nevi'im, and Mishlei as well as parts of Tehillim and quotations from the sages. Bernzteyn described this form of niggun as *farveylungslider*--a kind of entertaining chanson or ballad. They mix the sacred and secular; the content is *koidesh* or sacred, whereas the style employs a *heiterkeyt* or cheerful tone, as in *"Mi she'ahav et ha'avot"* (see Figure 2).

"B'cha bat'chu Avotenu," describes three different characters: a poor, a rich and a happy hasid. Despite a certain surface frivolity, all of these *niggunim* exhibit a certain *ernstkeit* [seriousness] and *geistike aristokratishkeit* [an intellectual aristocracy] (see Figure 3).

Abraham Moshe Bernzteyn developed a wide literary following. His ideas about Jewish music and Hazzanut were documented in both Hebrew and

Yiddish prose of his time. Articles were published in numerous journals and newspapers, including the *Vilner Tog* and *Chazzonim Velt*. His thoughts and opinions are read and quoted to this day by Jewish musicologists and prominent cantors throughout the world.[44]

The November edition of the 1933 *Hazzonim Velt*, a year after Bernzteyn's death, contained the following:

> He was a great *maskil*, '*ben-Torah*' and musicologist of great depth in the area of Hazzanut. His accomplishments were not simply in regard to theory and dry harmonization but also rich in content. He continually strove to achieve a balance between classical and modern music while at the same time being religious and folkloristic. He belonged to those who carved the way for modern Hazzanut as well as being the first and best reflection of the Vilna *nusach* in Jewish secular folk music.[45]

Thus, we have another example of an important figure in Vilna's vibrant history who sought to merge and explore the worlds of the sacred and the secular, this time in regard to music. He saw them not as separate entities but as vital influences in mutual growth and understanding.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid., 69.

Chayim Wasserzug

Chayim Wasserzug, also known as Chayim Lomzer, was born in Sieradz, Poland, in 1822.[46] He had an unusually beautiful voice at a very early age and received his first voice lessons from his father who was a cantor. At the young age of eighteeen, he took the position of cantor at Konin, near the German border. During the summers, he traveled around the Polish countryside, and as was customary, led Shabbat services in numerous communities. His reputation won him the position of Hazzan at Novodwor near Warsaw. The excitement was apparently so great that at his departure from Konin, a military convoy needed to be brought in to subdue the crowds.

Wasserzug was the first cantor in Russia to introduce choir and vocal harmony, and he also made music come alive as the language of the cantor in Russia. His compositions were widely sung and loved. He was also recognized as a reformer and since nearly the entire Novodwor community consisted of Hasidim, he did not have an easy time. However, thanks to his kind nature, he soon reclaimed their confidence.

Wasserzug enjoyed living so close to the musical city of Warsaw and during his thirteen-year stay in Novodwor he traveled there twice a week to study with

[46]Aron Friedmann, ed.,"Chayim Wasserzug" in Lebensbilder beruemter Kantoren, vol. I, (Berlin, 1918), 106.

famous teachers. His next position was in Lomza where he remained for five years. Loved by the community there, he acquired the name, "Reb Chayim Lomzer." His voice continued to grow in volume and beauty. During one of his trips to Vilna, after hearing him lead a Shabbat service, the *Kahal* unanimously agreed to hire him.

The glorious singing of Chayim Wasserzug lured many high Russian dignitaries, Christians and a minister from St. Petersburg to the Great Synagogue of Vilna. Wasserzug was honored by many invitations which was quite unusual for a Jew in those days. He also received numerous offers to sing in the opera in St.Petersburg, but the Hazzan's commitment to religion was too strong to enter the music of the secular world (unlike the Vilna Balabessel who will be discussed later). Wasserzug made frequent trips to Vienna where he continued to refine and broaden his musical insight and interpretation. He had many students who went on to hold positions not only in Russia and Poland, but also in Germany, France, Austria, England and America. In this way, Wasserzug's vocal art and style became recognized beyond eastern and central Europe.

On a visit to London in 1868, Wasserzug applied for the position of cantor at the North Synagogue where he was immediately accepted. Ten years later, he published his collection of old and modern synagogue melodies entitled Sefer Shirei Mikdash, which he had started in Vilna. Wasserzug was highly praised for his knowledge of harmony and vocal parts as well as for the interesting

collection and many beautiful melodies. There are choral manuscripts in the archives of YIVO which are yet to be researched.

Wasserzug enjoyed his life in London and despite vain attempts from his beloved Vilna community to reclaim him, his love for England and scorn for the Polish government forced him to decline. He returned to Vilna for occasional visits and was always received with open arms and generous gifts. Wasserzug died on August 24, 1882.

Jakov Goldstein

Jakov Goldstein was born in Warsaw circa 1900,[47] the sixth child of Isaac Goldstein. His first position as Hazzan was assistant to Shlomo Hirshman, brother of well-known Cantor Mordechai Hirshman. Before coming to serve the Jewish community in Vilna, he spent time in Rovne. Goldstein was chosen from among fifty three candidates to be the successor to Abraham Moshe Bernzteyn in Vilna from 1925-1932.

Jakov Goldstein, too, won the hearts of the Vilna community. He had a beautiful tenor voice, and was consistenty lauded by the press for the "moderation" and "tact" or *hartsike tfiles* [heartfelt prayer] in his *davening* and proper use of his "well-trained voice." He was noted for praying with good taste and understanding. The local newspapers claimed that hazzanim with "class"

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[47]It is not certain if he was born in 1899 or 1901.

who *daven* with seriousness were too seldom heard.

The newspaper articles from Vilna reviewing Goldstein's *Yom Tovim* and *Shabbos davening* as well as concert tours and radio appearances, shed additional light on the Vilna religious community of the time. The fact that the services were reviewed at all, and in such great detail, shows how important a role the music of the Hazzan played in the ears and hearts of the Jews in Vilna. Written in Yiddish, the articles give insight not only to religious life, but also reveal how intertwined it was with daily life.

"*Di rosh hashanah teg in vilne.*"[48] describes the atmosphere in the marketplace during Rosh Hashanah. The food stores were described, fish in particular, which when brought in on Friday, was relatively inexpensive. In this particular year there was a minimal demand for Hazzanim--many were left without a position. Also the monetary offerings for *aliyot* were small in number. The shuls, however, were full. Hazzan Goldstein had returned from his concert tour abroad with renewed strength and vigor. Goldstein had numerous tours in Riga, Kovno, Berlin and Bialystok as well as Holland, Germany and England.

Another article, *"Vilner lebn: rosh hashanah in Vilne,"*[49] describes the

[48]Goldstein archival collection, "The Days of Rosh Hashanah in Vilna." Unfortunately very few of the articles include dates or a newspaper source, but it can be assumed that most articles were from the newspaper *Vilner Lebn* [Vilna Life]. All subsequent footnotes are based on newspaper articles from the Goldstein archival collection, during the years dating from approximately 1925-1932, when Head Cantor Jakov Goldstein served at Taharat Hakodesh *(Khor Shul)* in Vilna.

[49]Ibid.,"Vilna life: Rosh Hashanah in Vilna".

attendance at Taharat Hakodesh, and the Shtot Shul, during the days of Rosh Hashanah in Vilna. On both days, the synagogues were full--Head Cantor Goldstein sang in Taharat Hakodesh and Cantor Koussevitsky[50] stood before the *oylom* [congregation] at the Shtot Shul, both accompanied by choirs. They were reported to have sung with equal understanding and aesthetic; however, Koussevitsky seemed to impress the masses in the Shtot Shul in particular, with his *yiddishe baal tfiles*, while Jakov Goldstein, with his "classical davening" was "more pleasing and appropriate to the intelligent public of Taharat Hakodesh."

Vilna was always the "cradle of the greatest hazzanim,"[51] and to please the Vilna audience was the best "diploma" one could wish for. In this article, devoted specifically to Vilna Hazzan Goldstein,[52] the writer praises his "beautiful Jewish style" and the fact that Goldstein maintains a balance and connection with the choir. He does not succumb to "cheap effects" to please the crowd. He concludes that Jakov Goldstein has all the qualities he needs: "A beautiful fresh and dramatic tenor with flexibility, a very strong middle range as well as coloratura, both unusual for a dramatic tenor." His tall stature is a pleasure to behold as well. Alman adds that it is very encouraging to see a "new generation of young cantors who have nothing to be ashamed of, but in fact are a step

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[50]The article did not indicate whether it was David or Moshe Koussevitsky, but it was most likely to have been Moshe Koussevitsky at that time.

[51]Professor Samuel Alman, *Vilner Lebn*, "Der Vilner Khazzan Jakov Goldstein." (Goldstein archival collection).

[52]Ibid.

ahead of the older cantors, because they possess additional knowledge of modern music." He hoped that the London community would be as happy to "own" Hazzan Goldstein as the Vilna community had been.

A typed, literal translation from the Hebrew, signed by the Chief Rabbi of Vilna, Isaac Rubinstein, dated the fourteenth of September, 1931, confirms this fact. The following is a direct quotation of the letter.

> The celebrated chanter [sic.] Mr. Jacob Goldstein is during 7 years Head-Chanter [sic.] of the Great Choral Synagogue under the name,"Taharat Hakodesh" here. In the course of this time he gained the sympathy of the people, acquired a reputation as an excellent"Khazzan" [sic.] provided with all the properties. Besides his distinctions in his line, his behaviour is very good. He is pious and be-loved by his community.

The London Times, following a concert tour while he was still Hazzan in Vilna, wrote of Goldstein that "...he came, he saw and he conquered!" He remained in London until he went to America in 1951. At a farewell reception of the Ministers (Hazzanim) Association in his honor, prominent speakers expressed sadness at seeing such an "eminent hazzan" and "great talmudist" leave their country. Goldstein announced that the reason for his departure was mainly "due to the restrictions encountered" when he was called upon "to officiate at various congregations outside the jurisdiction of the United Synagogue," which deprived him of "the opportunity of making better known the greatness of the Jewish liturgies."

Ten years later, after his untimely death, the papers claimed that "one of the greatest cantors of our time is gone." He embodied authentic Jewish nigunim and tradition with great musical knowledge. He was a great personality, and

music was his life.

Although each of these cantors possessed different talents, they were all part of the Vilna religious life and tradition. They were products of their time and place. They succeeded in combining *hazzonishe gefil* and style with elements of the reformation, such as the four-part choir. All of them sang with the choir at Taharat Hakodesh and Bernzteyn and Wasserzug composed extensively for the *Khor Shul*.

CHAPTER THREE

The Secular World of Vilna

The secular world of Vilna was extremely rich on a variety of levels. In chapter one, the connection between the Haskala movement and the development of the Maskilim in Vilna was mentioned. The modernists paved the way for the formation of secular Jewish schools and the emergence of diverse cultural as well as political groups and organizations. After introducing some of the most important areas that contributed to the history of Vilna's secular world, I will focus on *Yung Vilne* [Young Vilna] and the Vilna Troupe.

Vilna's Secular World

The secular institutions that were founded in Vilna remain until today. The Zionist Movement had its beginnings in Vilna which was also the "cradle" [53] of the Jewish labor movement and of the Jewish Labor Bund. In particular, Vilna was the center of Yiddish culture. There was a central school committee which was founded in 1919 with eight public schools, two Gymnasia, a teacher's seminary and two evening schools. That same year in Vilna, the Jewish Historical and Ethnographical Association was founded by S. An-Ski. The

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[53]Ibid., 38.

research institute for Yiddish language and culture was founded in 1924 with the creation of YIVO (*der yidisher visnshaftlekher institut*).

YIVO was based on an idea originally formulated in Berlin by East European scholars and intellectuals who had fled from violence following the Bolshevik Revolution.[54] The academy was to be a center for research and study in Yiddish linguistics and literature, Jewish history, social studies and pedagogy. Vilna, where both traditional and secular Jewish learning had flourished, was the ideal place for this plan to be realized. Branches were established in France, England and the United States. In 1941 when the Germans invaded Russia, its headquarters were moved to New York City.

Lucy Dawidowicz, who spent the inauspicious year of 1938-1939 in Vilna as a "research-fellow" at YIVO, points out how different the attitudes were towards Yiddish in New York as compared to Vilna at the time. During the 1930's in New York, Yiddish lectures, concerts and even theater were attended primarily by the older generation. Dawidowicz and her friends, who were members of the Sholem Aleichem Yugnt Gezelshaft [Sholem Aleichem Youth Organization] were apparently the exception and felt an obligation to their parents and the future of Yiddish in America. (This is similar to the phenomena found among second-generation Holocaust children of today.) In the Vilna of the 1930's, the opposite of New York was true. Yiddish functions were attended mostly by the young. The traditional world of the *kloyzn* [prayerhouses] belonged primarily to the old.

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[54]Ibid., 25.

whereas the Yiddish culture of the secular world seemed to be dominated by the young generation.

One of the most celebrated *badkh'nim* [Yiddish bard or minstrel] in eastern Europe was Eliakum Zunser, who lived from 1840-1913.[55] Zunser wrote two particularly memorable songs: *"Shivas Tsiyon"* [Return to Zion] and *"Di Sokhe"* [The Plow]. With the emergence of the modern Zionist movement in the last decade of the nineteenth century, a "new and distinctively rich genre of Jewish folk song was created and sung." [56] This new form of "folk music expression" fueled the movement with religious chants, holiday hymns as well as secular diasporic tunes employing prayerbook Hebrew and the vernaculars of Ladino and especially Yiddish.

Zunser emigrated to the United States in 1889 and operated a small printing shop on East Broadway. Abraham Cahan regards Zunser as one of the "immortals in the history of Yiddish life" and describes him as " one of the most remarkable men I have ever met.To do justice to his unique genius, to appreciate the charm which his songs had for our people, one must be familiar with the combined effect of the text and music in them, with special attention to

[55]Irene Heskes in Passport to Jewish Music,(Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994) mentions two different birthdates: 1840,page 62 and 1836, page 236.

[56]Ibid., 235.

the peculiar witchery of the rhythm throbbing in both."[57] He recalled hearing him perform in Vilna in the late 1870s. "A dense crowd was listening spellbound in the street outside. And for weeks and weeks afterward I would often catch myself humming one of the tunes I had heard on that divine evening..."[58]

Although the secular world of Vilna was very much a part of the modern world, we will see nevertheless how a number of individuals struggled to maintain a balance between the old and the new, and to achieve an intellectual and artistic understanding of both worlds.

Yung Vilne

A society of young writers and artists, *Yung Vilne*, bonded together primarily for moral support and to help one another in getting published or exhibited. They were all politically committed to the left, which was reflected in the "modest little journal" they occasionally published, not only in content but also orthographically, adopting to the Soviet style of spelling the Hebrew words in Yiddish phonetically.[59] Inspired by Moishe Kulback, the most prominent members of *Yung Vilne* were Chaim Grade, Abraham Sutzkever, Shmerke

[57]Abraham Cahan, "Selected Songs of Eliakum Zunser,"(New York: The Zunser Publishing Company, 1928), forward.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Dawidowicz, 124.

Kaczerginski and Wolf Younin. Moishe Kulback, mentor, author, teacher and Yiddish poet was born in 1896. He lived in Vilna before the war and again from 1923-1928 when he left Poland to settle in the Soviet Union where he remained until his death in 1940. Kulback is remembered by Dina Abramovitch, YIVO librarian, and actor David Rogoff.[60] Abramovitch attended his classes in Yiddish literature at the *Gymnasium* (High School) in Vilna, and "he inspired all his students." When Rogoff was at the *Gymnasium*, he was awarded the first prize for his impersonation of Charlie Chaplin. The teacher, Moishe Kulback, presented young Rogoff with two of his books which were considered great treasures. When the Red Army entered Vilna in 1939 and Kulback was arrested in Minsk, Rogoff hid his books in the basement.

All of the writers of the *Yung Vilne* were "children of Vilna's Jewish poverty,"[61] products of the Great War's dislocations. Abraham Sutzkever was born in 1913 in Smorgon, a town in White Russia not very far from Vilna. After fleeing to Siberia from the German army in 1915, the family finally settled in Vilna in 1920. Sutzkever attended a Hebrew-Polish secondary school and later earned money as a retoucher. Sutzkever developed a formal and sophisticated writing style and was greatly influenced by the introspective Yiddish poets in the United States, in particular, Aaron Glanz-Leyeles. Sutzkever was forever searching

[60]Dina Abramovitch, David Rogoff and Shimen Pavelsky, Jewish Theological Seminary , Panel discussion under the moderation of Dr. David Fishman, (New York, 13 December 1994).

[61]Dawidowicz, 123.

and grappling with new modes of poetic expression. He was one of the more unlikely products of Vilna's Jewish poverty.

Chaim Grade was the complete opposite of Abraham Sutzkever, both in appearance and temperament. He was "short and squarish"[62] and had spent ten years of his youth as a *yeshiva-bokher*. Critics have compared him to Chaim Nachman Bialik. Grade was born in Vilna in 1910, the son of a learned Jew and a *maskil* who tried to make a living as a Hebrew teacher. Chaim's father died when the boy was very young, and he was placed in a home for poor children. His mother, the daughter of a rabbi, intent on seeing her son become a *talmid khokhem* [learned Jew], sent him to various yeshivas in Vilna and the surrounding area, while she remained in a "wretched cellar hovel" [63] in the poor Jewish quarter on *ulica Jatkowa* selling fruit on the street. Chaim Grade is one of the outstanding figures to emerge from Vilna's religious and secular worlds in terms of his equal involvement and struggles. In the yeshiva, he was confronted by the "irreconcilability" of both tradition and modernity. He was punished for reading secular books, and after years of inner conflict, left the yeshiva at age twenty-two to fulfill his dream of becoming a poet, thus choosing to join the modern, secular world.

Grade's entire life and his writing were, in fact, molded by two main influences his mother and the yeshiva. Both of these early forces remained with him, to

[62]Ibid., 125.

[63]Ibid., 126.

inspire as well as to torment him all through is entire life. Grade never lost his obsession with the *musar*-yeshiva of Nowogrodek,[64] about one hundred and fifty miles south of Vilna, where he had spent his late teens. The Navaredok was a maximalist yeshiva, which demanded extreme self-discipline as well as self-denial and self-flagellation. Chaim Grade's first book *Yo* [Yes] published in 1936 included a the poem entitled "My Mother," and his second book, published in February of 1939, *Musarniks*, consisted of one single narrative poem about life in the Navaredok yeshiva. The following is an excerpt from another piece of writing, reflecting his bitter, internal struggles based on his experience in the yeshiva:

> When you ask the Nawaredoker, 'How do you do?' the meaning is 'How is Jewishness with you? Have you advanced in spirituality? He who has studied *musar* will never enjoy his life further. Chaim, you will remain a cripple your whole life. You write heresy, but is there any one of you really so strong that he does not desire public approval for himself? Which one of you is prepared to publish his book anonymously? Our spiritual calm you have exchanged for passions which you will never attain, for doubts which, even after much self-torture, you will not be able to explain away. Your writing will not improve a single person,and it will make you worse.[65]

Dawidowicz, who became closely associated with the writers of *Yung Vilne*, considered Chaim Grade and Abraham Sutzkever to be the only really "serious

[64]Also called Navaredok by the Jews.

[65]Encyclopaedia Judaica, "Musar Movement," 537. From Grade's "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner," in I. Howe and E. Greenberg, eds., Treasury of Yiddish Stories,(New York: The Viking Press Inc., 1954) 579-606.

writers."[66]

Shmerke Katczerginski, like Grade, had been raised in an orphanage in Vilna during the Great War. After Talmud Torah studies, he became an apprentice to a lithographer at age thirteen. Although a "genial and good-natured"[67] person, he developed a tough exterior in order to protect himself from the world in which he had grown up. He adhered to Communist ideology and had actually been arrested a couple of times for writing pieces the authorities considered subversive." He was the primary organizer of *Yung Vilna*, socially and institutionally. [68]

The Vilna Troupe

During the German occupation of Vilna in 1916, the Federation of Yiddish Actors (FADO) was formed at 11 Pagulanda Street. This was the home of Leib Kadison, originally from Kovno, who became the dramatic director of the Yiddish acting company which become famous throughout eastern Europe as The Vilna Troupe. Having become friendly with a couple of German officers who were Jewish, the founding members somehow managed to persuade the authorities to grant them permission to perform. They secured an abandoned theater which

[66]Dawidowicz, 124.

[67]Ibid., 123.

[68]Ibid., 123.

had at one time been a circus, and even received a kind of subsidy from the government--a few sacks of potatoes. The young actors were nourished more by their "youthful enthusiasm"[69] for the theater than the small amounts of food available at the time.

The living room at number eleven Pagulanka street became a rehearsal hall Chanah, Leib's wife, would dole out their daily meal from her small iron stove--a baked potato for each, while the conversation and discussions never ceased. During these times, the guiding principles and style of the Vilna Troupe took shape. Questions were debated such as: "What does an art theater represent? What can one learn from Stanislavski and Vakhtangov? Can acting be taught? Which Yiddish dialect would be right for this theater? Who is the greatest European playwright? The greatest Yiddish playwright?"[70]

The last surviving member of the "legendary"[71] Vilna Troupe, Luba Kadison, daughter of Leib, and wife of the Troupe's most "illustrious" actor, Joseph Bulow, felt compelled to write her memoirs lest one of the most important chapter in Yiddish and European culture be lost. Luba Kadison was present at the founding of the ensemble which literally took place in the Kadison family's living room where they all lived together, ate together, and played together.

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[69]Luba Kadison and Joseph Buloff, Onstage, Offstage Memories of a Lifetime in the Yiddish Theatre, with a preface by Charles Berlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Library, 1992), 7.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Ibid., 1.

The Kadisons left Vilna for Warsaw in 1918, and thus were spared the fate of so many Jews who remained in Vilna when the Poles took over again. The company had already relocated, and it was actually in Warsaw that the most famous play of the Vilna Troupe (and all Yiddish Theater) was premiered, *The Dybbuk*, by S. An-ski.

S. An-Ski

Professor David Roskies describes S. An-Ski, born Shloyme-Zanvl ben Aaron Hacohen Rappoport, as "a man for all seasons."[72] He was born in 1863 in Marc Chagall's city of Vitebsk. The young man, reputed to be a Talmud prodigy, left the Jewish world to fight for various political Russian causes. In particular, he sided with the "simple peasant folk" or *narod*, gave himself the Russian name of Semyon Akimovitch, and later even went as far as to convert to Christianity, "elimininating the last barrier between himself and the Russian folk."[73] In St. Petersburg, An-Ski became involved with *Narodnaya Volya* [People's Will].

On the birth of the Jewish Labor Bund in 1897, An-Ski began to take an interest in his people, but less for their Jewish identity than their Marxist and international philosophies. For a short time he even became the official poet of

[72]David Roskies Lecture:"S.An-Ski and the Making of the Dybbuk," November 13, 1994, The Jewish Museum.

[73]David G. Roskies, The Dybbuk and Other Writings by S. An-Ski. (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), xii.

the Jewish Labor Bund in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, under another pseudonym, Z. Sinanni, which meant "Anna's son."[74] He was the author of *Di Shvue* [The Oath] (to which A.M. Bernstein wrote music), which became the official anthem of the Jewish Labor Bund. But it was not until 1901 that An-Ski completely rekindled his connection with the Jewish world. After reading the collected writings of I.L. Peretz in Yiddish, he was inspired to resume writing in the language he had abandoned for nearly twenty years. The satire and neoromanticism of Peretz spoke directly to him.

An-Ski had crossed the border and now spanned both Russian and Jewish worlds--his intention was now to achieve a "synthesis between the folk and the intelligentsia, tradition and modernity, politics and culture."[75] He married a Jewish woman, wrote both in Yiddish and in Russian, and openly expressed his regrets at a banquet in his honor in St.Petersburg in 1910:

> Bearing within me an eternal yearning toward Jewry, I nevertheless turned in all directions and went to labor on behalf of another people. My life was broken, severed, ruptured. Many years of my life passed on this frontier, on the border between two worlds. Therefore, I beg you, on this twenty-fifth year of summing up my literary work, to eliminate sixteen years.[76]

[74]An-Ski's mother was named Anna, and he often felt guilty because she had suffered so much when he left his old Jewish world.

[75]Roskies, The Dybbuk and Other Writings, xix.

[76]Ibid.

According to Roskies, An-Ski did not renounce everything, but retained the ideas learned as an adolescent rebel, mostly written in Russian. He became intimately involved with the Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Society, the Jewish Literary Society, and the Society for Jewish Folk Music, as well as becoming the literary editor of the Russian-Jewish monthly. The Jewish Ethnographic Expedition, which he led from 1912-1914, was An-Ski's brainchild. It was, according to An-Ski himself, "a survey of Jewish life on a national scale if not larger."[77] By the time it ended, cut short by the war, An-Ski and an outstanding group of scholars and enthusiastic young field workers had collected: two thousand photographs, eighteen hundred folktales and legends, fifteen hundred folk songs and mysteries (i.e. biblical Purim plays), five hundred cylinders of Jewish folk music, one thousand melodies to songs and *niggunim*, proverbs and folk beliefs, one hundred historical documents, five hundred manuscripts, and seven hundred sacred objects acquired for the sum of six thousand rubles.[78]

During this expedition, An-Ski experienced a kind of religious exultation and wrote in the preface to The Jewish Ethnographic Program:

[77]Ibid., xxiii.

[78]Ibid.

> The Oral Tradition consisting of all manner of folklore -- stories, legends, parables, songs, witticisms, melodies, customs and beliefs --is, like the Bible, the product of the Jewish spirit; it reflects the same beauty and purity of the Jewish soul, the same modesty and nobility of the Jewish heart, the same loftiness and depth of Jewish thought.[79]

The last vestiges of Jewish folklore, An-Ski proclaimed, constituted a bridge between Jews and gentile, between past and present.

[79]Ibid., xxiv.

CHAPTER FOUR

Expressions of Conflict Within Artistic Forms

There are obviously many examples one can find in writing excerpts, stylistic musical contrasts, rhetorical statements and theological arguments to illustrate how many individuals struggled with the imposing, and yet enriching worlds of *The Jerusalem of Lithuania*. I am particularly struck by two: The film, *Der Vilner Balebessel* [80] featuring Hazzan Moishe Oysher with music by Alexander Olshanetsky, and An-Ski's famous play, *The Dybbuk*. *Der Vilner Balebessel* presents a stark picture of the "opposing" worlds in Vilna, the religious and the secular, as represented by music.

The Dybbuk not only deals with earthly and mystical realms, but has historical and folklorisitic threads and also symbolizes the conflicts within the generations in Judaism as well as An-Ski's own life, which indeed was a struggle between two worlds.

"Between Two Worlds"--Der Dybbuk

The preface itself to the first performance of *Der Dybbuk* in Warsaw has quite an interesting scenario. The play was written in Russian and Yiddish in

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[80]Also known as *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn* or "Overture to Glory."

1914. The Hebrew translation by Chaim Nakhman Bialik was published in *Ha-Tekufah* in Moscow in 1918. Originally it should have premiered in Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theater. However, Stanislavsky became ill in 1917, and then, due to the war, An-Ski fled and returned to Vilna. In addition to leaving all his ethnographic collections and papers behind, he lost the manuscript for *The Dybbuk*.

Only one copy of the play--a Hebrew translation by Bialik--which belonged to a German Jewish officer, could be found in Vilna. An-Ski had to translate his own work back into Yiddish from the Hebrew. The Yiddish version was published in Vilna in 1919. The premiere took place only after An-Ski's death, following the thirty-day mourning period of *Shloshim*, on December 9, 1920. *The Dybbuk* became the Vilna Troupe's most popular play--so popular, in fact, that at the tram stop across from the theatre in Vilna, the trolley car driver would annouce, "Dybbuk, everybody off!"[51]

The Yiddish Art Theatre in New York presented *The Dybbuk*, produced by Maurice Schwartz, in 1921. The first Habimah production in Tel Aviv was presented in 1922 with Bialik's Hebrew translation and music by Joel Engel. German, Polish, English, Ukranian, Swedish and Bulgarian productions followed in their respective languages. Ludovico Rocca composed the first opera based on *The Dybbuk* in 1934 and the famous film, with screenplay by Alter Kacyzne and Mark Arenstein and music by Henekh Kon, was produced in Poland in

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[51]Roskies, November 13, 1994 lecture, The Jewish Museum.

1937. There have been numerous stage revivals, as well as a dramatic ballet based on *The Dybbuk*, by Pearl Lang in 1975.[82]

The original title, "Betweeen Two Worlds," reflects An-Ski's own struggle between his traditional Jewish world and his adopted secular world. It was also, perhaps prophetically, conceived in terms of the Jewish struggle against all the forces threatening to destroy European culture. The main characters, Leah and Chanan, are betrothed to one another by their fathers, before they were born. Through the power of destiny, they meet and fall desperately in love, although Leah's rich father has broken the vow and forces her to marry another man. Chanan dies of despair and Leah visits his grave. At her wedding, it is soon clear, as she begins to speak in a masculine voice, that she is possessed. Although a *vunderrebbe* is able to exorcise the ghost, Leah dies and is finally united with her beloved.

At that time, the play was extremely controversial; a trial was held in Tel Aviv in 1926, for condemning it as a "pastiche of 'legendary, realistic and symbolist' elements."[83] In spite of this opposition the folk elements evoked by An-Ski had a powerful appeal on the audiences in Eretz Israel who could not forget the past. An-Ski had "...taken the 'old life' and torn down the boundaries--between Torah and taboo, rebbe and rebel, mysticism and modernity--only to put them back

[82]Eleanor Mlotek, S. An-Ski, Shloyme-Zanvl Rappoport, 1863-1920: His Life and Works, researched and compiled by Eleanor Mlotek,(New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1980).

[83]Roskies, The Dybbuk and Other Writings, xxvi.

together again."[84]

Singer Masha Benya remembers seeing a later performance of *The Dybbuk* by the Habimah Theatre. "It was so unusual in the country of the Mitnagdim...that's why it had such an appeal, such fascination; to us it was romantic and exotic."[85]

Der Vilner Balebessel

The legendary cantor, Joel David Loewenstein-Strashunsky, better known as "The Vilner Balebessel," was six years old when his father, Tzvi Hirsh Bochoor Haleyvi Loewenstein, became Chief Cantor of Vilna in 1822. Joel David had great talent, and received early musical, religious and secular language training He had his "bima debut" at the age of eleven with the chanting of the *Maftir Aliyah* and *Haftarah*--his performance was so sensational that he was asked to lead the *Musaf* service on that day.[86]

So begins the true story of the Vilna cantor who fell in love with a Polish countess and led a life filled with conflicts and tragedies. In the film, Vilna Cantor Strashunsky, portrayed by Moishe Oysher, enters the home of composer Stanislav Moniuszko, entranced by the sounds of Beethoven, Mozart and

[84]Ibid.

[85]Masha Benya, interview by the author, 16 August 1994.

[86]Samuel Vigoda, Legendary Voices, 390-427.

Chopin he hears through an open window. Strashunsky studies the music on his own, before Moniuszko takes him under his wing. The secular musicians tell him he will "go to waste in his surroundings," whereas he is warned and reminded by his people to "remember who preceded you--your voice is ours, you have given us joy." The cantor ignores their warnings and decides to leave Vilna on the invitation of Moniuszko to sing the title role in his opera "Halke" in Warsaw Apart from their resentment and disappointment, Strashunsky's financial supporters (*balebatim*), his rebbe and father-in-law, were all convinced that "a *dybbuk* has entered this man."[87]

I find it interesting, that once again, we encounter the folk image of the *dybbuk*, this time a demon not from the supernatural world, but the world of secular music. The Vilner Hazzan was drawn to the music of the opera and told his people. "If I sing in Polish, they will hear the Jewish sorrow in my voice. I will pour out all the holy prayers to them and they will understand..." But still he was warned, "you will be left between two worlds."

Before he leaves Vilna, the film shows him singing a lullaby to his son, "Unter Beymer," by Olshanetsky. The text, written by Moishe Oysher, is not particularly profound, but the sentimental melody has become a well-known favorite in the Yiddish folk- and light art song repertoire. Strashunsky reaps success in Warsaw and begins to enjoy "the other world" of glamour and glory.[88] Yet he

[87]Film: "Der Vilner Balebessel."

[88]Hence the English title:" Overture to Glory."

never forgets his beloved Vilna and realizes that despite all his success and the fact that his dream has come true, his soul is not here in Warsaw. It is at this point that he sings the popular song, "Vilna," which nostalgically describes his hometown. Characteristic of films of this period, there is practically no moment without some sort of background music. Most of it is extremely sentimental, but the film also includes some wonderful displays of Hazzanut and *davening* in contrast to the operatic and classical music.

The Vilner Belabessel's brief "overture to glory" is over when he receives the news of his young son's death. He had not known the boy was ill--had he died of a broken heart?

The final overly-sentimental and dramatic scene shows his return to Vilna on Yom Kippur when he arrives in time to step into the synagogue and, with his dying breath, sings "Kol Nidre." The film concludes with the epitaph: "For them he sang and for us he prayed."

When Both Worlds Met

The film's message in *The Vilner Balebessel* has moralistic overtones, in terms of the cantor having left his religious community for the glamour of the opera stage. Many legends circulated about this man who showed unusual talent at an early age. Samuel Vigoda explains that when Strashunsky left Warsaw, he actually went on to Vienna where he encountered the synagogue

music of Solomon Sulzer, who brought classical music "into the temples of prayer."[89] He was tormented as to whether he should retain his Lithuanian-Polish *nusach* or adopt the new school of Sulzer. This man exemplified someone who crossed the borders and was confused about who he really was, and could not cope with the synthesis of the two worlds.

The individuals introduced in chapters two and three, whether primarily associated with the religious community, such as The Vilna Gaon or Abraham Moshe Bernzteyn, or expressing their creativity and philosophies within the realm of the secular, like Chaim Grade and Shmuel An-Ski, all have something in common. They were caught in a constant struggle between the old and the new, between tradition and reform, between religious values and modern thought, but all of them were able to synthesize their struggles into creative and innovative forms. I am inclined to think that those who left the religious world to become a part of the secular world had more to contend with. But I believe that they also felt enriched by it.

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[89]Vigoda, 409.

CHAPTER FIVE

Foreshadowing of a Legacy

Before the Second World War began, with Adolf Hitler's declaration of war on September 1, 1939, approximately 80,000 Jews were living in Vilna. In the seventeenth century, no fewer than forty rabbis had resided there. The Gaon of Vilna made his appearance in the eighteenth century, and in the nineteenth century Vilna became the birthplace of the Maskil Movement. It had been a center for cantors, musicians, poets, writers and artists from all over Europe. Lucy Dawidowicz poignantly states the sad truth: in the past their concentration had enriched their creativity, under the Germans it would hasten their doom.[90]

The Vilna Ghetto and the Partisans

The Jews of Vilna were moved into the ghetto on September 6, 1941. Already thousands of mass shootings had taken place at Ponary, ten kilometers outside the town. For weeks, no one knew about Ponary. Some survivors returned--stunned, shocked and disoriented--their stories could hardly be believed, and these few were considered "demented"[91] or psychologically

[90]Lucy Dawidowicz, The War Against the Jews, 266.

[91]Ibid., 386.

unstable.

In the ghetto, the killing became more systematic. At any time, armed German or Lithuanian police would surround the ghetto and remove hundreds or thousands who were never seen again. The pre-war *Kehillot*--the official religious administrations of the community--were transformed under German Gestapo orders into the *Judenrat*, [local Jewish council]. These councils were eventually responsible for establishing the *Ordnungsdienst* [Jewish police], which collected taxes from ghetto residents. Taxes were required by the *Judenrat* who needed to maintain welfare services and negotiate ransom issues with the Germans.[92]

There were the *Scheine*--the work cards, granting so-called security--a method of screening the "productive" from the "non-productive."[93] Then the Germans found a new method of eliminating the Jews in large numbers. The *Judenrat* received three thousand yellow cards to be distributed to individuals able to productively assist in the war effort. Self-preservation became the only passport to survival, not only among the ghetto inhabitants, but also members of the *Judenrat* and Jewish police. *Protektsye* or "Vitamin P"[94] implied the use of influence or connections within the ghetto to improve one's status, although bribery, smuggling, and a ghetto underworld were also part of the internal

[92]Ibid., 315.

[93]Ibid., 386.

[94]Ibid., 320.

structure.

Both institutions, the *Judenrat* and the Jewish police, were controlled by the Germans. Although there to protect the ghetto inhabitants, their own lives as Jews were in jeopardy and corruption was rampant. One of the most controversial figures was Jacob Gens, a Revisionist from Kovno, who at one time, had been an officer in the Lithuanian army. He began as the Vilna ghetto's chief of police and gained power and authority within the ghetto. In July of 1942, the SS appointed Gens chief of the ghetto, dissolving the *Judenrat* for incompetence.[95] He later claimed that by acting on behalf of the Germans during selection and *Aktionen* [organized round-ups] he ultimately saved more lives. He was shot by the Gestapo on September 15, 1943, accused of supporting the underground.

There were resistance movements within the ghetto, including a united fighting organization called F.P.O.[*Fareynigte Partizaner Organizatsye*], led by Itsik Vitnberg, Joseph Glazman and Abba Kovner. In the beginning, they chose to stay in the ghetto rather than escape to join the partisans in the forest. There was a separate group led by Ilya Sheinboim,[96] who later teamed up with the others. Itsik Vitnberg, commander of the partisan forces in the Vilna ghetto, was arrested by the Gestapo on July 16, 1943. Although he was freed by the F.P.O.

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[95]Ibid., 319.

[96]Ilya Sheinboim was my Aunt Pesia Bernstein's first husband and Leon Bernstein's good friend.

on the way to prison, Vitnberg turned himself in when the Gestapo threatened to liquidate the entire Vilna ghetto if he did not surrender. Ilya Sheinboim was one of the first partisans killed in the ghetto in a battle with German soldiers.

My uncle, Leon Bernstein, a handsome mathematics professor in Vilna, who later taught many admiring pupils in the Vilna ghetto,[97] survived with Pesia, his future wife, as a partisan in the forest. Leon later was instrumental in helping survivors emigrate to Israel by way of DP camps in Italy. He also became the Director of the World Jewish Congress office in Tel Aviv. My father, Yehuda Bernstein, fled Lithuania in 1939 after being expelled from his teaching position at the State Conservatory of Music in Memel. He escaped to Palestine, with a group of "illegal" immigrants and later taught at the music academy in Tel Aviv. Other family members were less fortunate. Their father, Tuvia, who owned a shoe factory in Skuodas, was forced to dig his own grave which became part of a mass grave behind the synagogue. Mother Jenny (also a pianist), and youngest brother, Emanuel, were shot on the street outside their home. A third brother, Elias, was shot outside the conservatory in Kovno (Kaunus), where he had been an aspiring piano student, and sister Mia, a university student in Vilna, died as a partisan fighter in the forest.

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[97]Film: " Partisans of Vilna."

"Lithuanian Memories"

Countless hymns, songs, and poems survive as memorials to those who did not. For most, there are no graves to honor their lives. Hirsh Glik wrote *Sog nit Keinmol* (Never Say) in the Vilna ghetto. It spread to other ghettos and became the anthem of the partisans, translated into almost every language in the world. It has been included in the afternoon Mincha service for Yom Kippur in the Gates of Repentence[98] as well as in the Erev Shabbat Service number three in the Gates of Prayer.[99] Its march-like style gave courage to those who sang it in the ghettos and camps. In our time the forward moving melody suggests taking positive action and responsibility for one's destiny. Aviva Kempner produced and Josh Waletzsky directed the documentary film, "Partisans of Vilna", with eye-witnesss accounts and interviews. Most of the survivors are quite old by now and many are sick; many others have died. The songs, diaries, books, poems, paintings, sculptures, drawings and photographs are painful but important testimonies to the bravery and the suffering and the rich worlds of Vilna that were annihilated.

My father, Julian Bern, studied at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris, with Alfred Cortot and Nadia Boulanger, two of the foremost musicians and

[98]Gates of Repentence, ed. Chaim Stern (New York: CCAR, 1984), 441.

[99]Gates of Prayer, ed. Chaim Stern (New York: CCAR, 1975), 173.

teachers of this century. He also studied in Riga, Latvia, at the State Academy of Music. Following his graduation *cum laude* in 1935, he was invited to teach at the State Academy of Music in Memel (Lithuania). After he fled to Palestine in 1939, he later taught at the Academy of Music in Tel Aviv. In Israel, still known as Yehuda Bernstein, he composed numerous songs, including music to *Akara*, the poem by Rakhel,[100] as well as solo piano pieces based on oriental scales and rhythms, such as the *Hora* and *Hagar's Dance* [Biblical Dance].

In 1983, then living in the United States, my father composed a cycle of four songs to poems written by his brother, Leon Bernstein, about their beloved mother and home in Lithuania, entitled "Lithuanian Memories." The poems were written in German, their mother-tongue in the Baltic region of Memelland. The first song, called "The Temple" equates a mother's love with the protection and warmth of a temple. It ends with the words: "the murder of mothers would cause even a god to take his own eternal life." The lyrical, somewhat Straussian music, contemplative at first, acquires a foreboding quality through chordal dissonance. The second piece, "At the Old Marketplace" where their mother met her death, is a *romance* while "The Lullaby," the third in the cycle, rocks us from the nostalgia of our own childhood to the pain of childbirth and death. The cycle concludes with "Resurrection," painting a sort of agitato "Erlkoenig" mood, with a dramatic image of their mother returning to bury her dead son.

[100]Jehoash Hirshberg, Paul Ben-Haim, His Life and Works, (Jerusalem: Israeli Music Publications Ltd.,1990), 181.

The Legacy

Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski had smuggled books and documents out of YIVO in suitcases and hidden them in the ghetto. After the war, Sutzkever mailed everything, in one envelope after another to YIVO in New York. Included also were detailed accounts of "life and death"[101] in the ghetto. This became the Sutzkever--Kaczerginski Collection of the Vilna Ghetto which is stored in the YIVO archives. Sutzkever emigrated to Palestine in 1947 and in 1949 founded the literary journal, *Di Goldene Keyt* [The Golden Chain], which continues to reach Yiddish readers throughout the world. Chaim Grade settled in the United States in 1948, writing until his death in 1982. Kaczerginski emigrated to Buenos Aires and published a book in 1952 about the partisans. He tragically died two years later in a plane crash.

Dina Abramovitch and Shimen Pavelsky[102] both came from religious backgrounds in Vilna. Abramovitch's father was a rabbi and Pavelsky remembers studying in the yeshiva from nine in the morning until six thirty at night. He later joined the labor movement and became involved in the Zionist and yiddish cultural movements. Pavelsky is the present director of *Nusach Vilna*, an organization in New York committed to the memory of Vilna--a

[101]Dawidowicz, From that Place and Time, 310.

[102]Ibid.

testimony to the religious and cultural way of life in Vilna . The group, first founded to commemorate the liquidation of the ghetto on September 23, 1943, originally met at least every three weeks. They now meet a few times during the year.

In December 1994, I attended a ceremony at the *Arbeter Ring* [Workman's Circle], on the occasion of the publication of the second volume of *Yivo Bleter*, scholarly writings in Yiddish on the culture and history of Lithuanian Jewry. It was exciting to listen to lectures presented in Yiddish and to witness, and be part of, the perpetuation of the language and culture.

David Rogoff returned to his native Vilna in August of 1994, when he was invited to perform in a pageant, under the direction of an American choreographer, staged in the surrounding forest. The audience of mostly non-Jews was bussed in from Minsk, Vilna and Kaunus. "Vilna was no longer the same city it once was. It was a special city--we knew it even while we were living there...All great writers, poets had to visit Vilna. People were poor but cultured." [103]

I wondered--is there any other city in the world similar to Vilna? Rogoff replied, "When I visited the Old City of Jerusalem years later, I was reminded of Vilna. I suddenly felt I was home!"

Of all the synagogues in Vilna, only the *Khor Shul* was left standing. But in a way, the Jerusalem of Lithuania lives on--in the hearts and souls of those who

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[103]David Rogoff, Yivo Interview.

knew it. The rest is up to those of us who are alive--to carry the melodies, poetry, liturgy, philosophy, and ideas to future generations, to make them understand and appreciate the rich worlds left behind.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, originally from Warsaw, who taught at Hebrew Union College in Cinncinnati, closed the annual YIVO conference in New York on January 7, 1945, with the following eulogy to East European Jewry:

> When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and set fire to the Temple, our forefathers did not forget the Revelation at Mount Sinai and the words of the Prophets. Today the world knows that what transpired on the soil of Palestine was sacred history, from which mankind draws inspiration. A day may come when the hidden light of the East European era may be revealed.[104]

Today, with YIVO, the Workman's Circle, and *Nusach Vilna* centered in New York, as well as thriving Jewish religious communities and synagogues, perhaps we may witness the light of renewed growth and redemption of both worlds, religious and secular--a reflection of the past and hope for the future.

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[104]As cited in Dawidowicz, From that Place and Time, 261.

INTERIOR OF THE OLD SYNAGOGUE AT WILNA.
(From a photograph.)

Figure 1

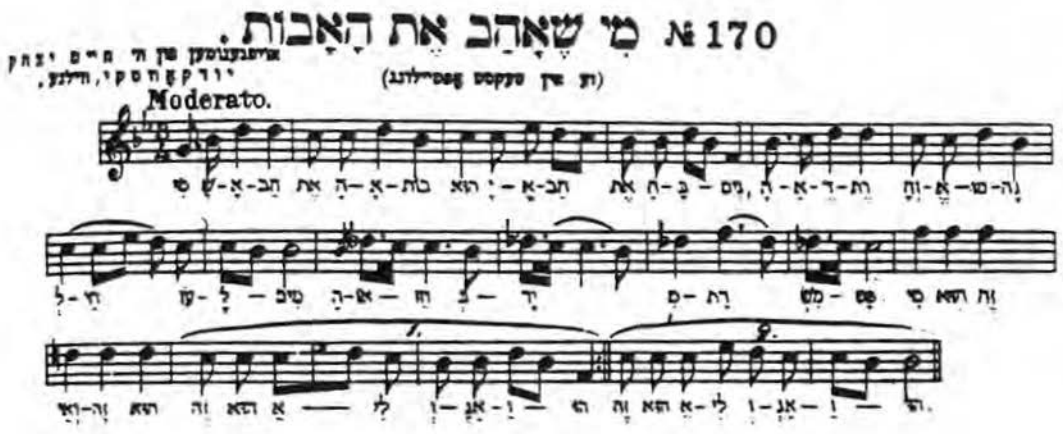

Figure 2

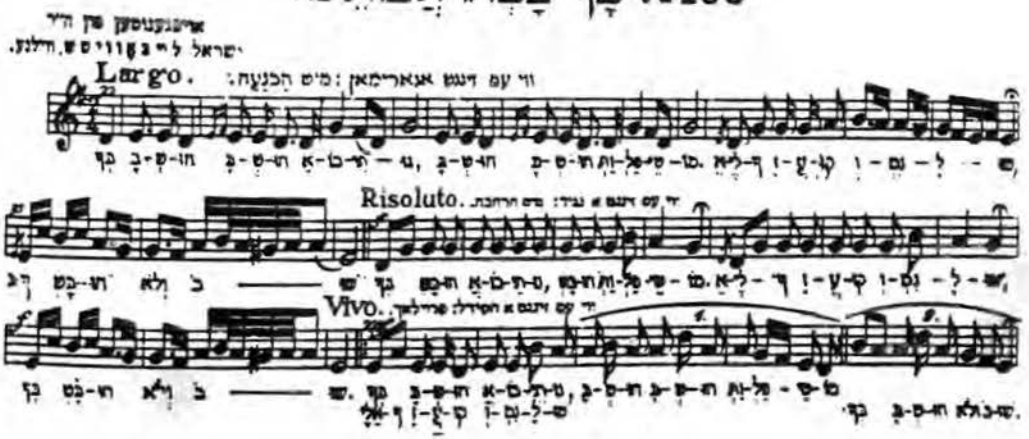

Figure 3

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