
 THIRTEEN

WILNO/VILNIUS/VILNE

Whose City Is It Anyway?

 MORDECHAI ZALKIN

Dear Tomas. Two poets, one Lithuanian, the other Polish, were raised in the same city. Surely that is reason enough for them to discuss their city even in public. True, the city I knew belonged to Poland, was called Wilno, and its schools and university used the Polish language. Your city was the capital of the Lithuanian Socialist Republic, was called Vilnius . . . nevertheless, it is the same city; its architecture, its surrounding terrain, and its sky shaped us both. . . . I have the impression that cities possess their own spirit or aura, and at times, walking the streets of Wilno, it seemed to me, that I became physically aware of that aura.

This paragraph, written in 1979 by the famous Polish poet Czesław Miłosz to his younger colleague, the Lithuanian poet and dissident Tomas Venclova, is taken from the opening remark of what is known as ‘A Dialogue about Wilno’.¹ At the basic level, this dialogue, or in fact this city, situated on the banks of the Neris river, serves both the Polish and the Lithuanian poets as a platform for an examination of their own personal and national identity. It is the same city and yet not the same city. At times, indeed, the reader may even think that they are talking about two totally different places. Admitting that, for the Poles, ‘Wilno was a provincial city rather than a capital’,² Miłosz still considered it an important centre of Polish life, primarily because of its unique cultural heritage. For him, the famous opening line of Adam Mickiewicz’s poem *Pan Tadeusz*—‘Litwo! Ojczyzno moja!’ (Lithuania! My homeland!)—is more than anything else a cultural statement or, as he defined it, ‘Wilno cannot be excluded from the history of Polish culture, if only because of Mickiewicz, the Philomaths, Słowacki and Piłsudski’.³ In fact, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki were part and parcel of the self-image of only a handful of Polish residents, mainly the intellectual circles connected to the local Stefan Batory University. The rest of the ‘Polish’ inhabitants were, according to Miłosz, just ‘Polish-speaking Lithuanians’. In

¹ Czesław Miłosz and Tomas Venclova, ‘A Dialogue about Wilno’, in Tomas Venclova, *Forms of Hope* (New York, 1999), 5–31: 5. On Venclova, see Donata Mitaitė, *Tomas Venclova: Speaking through Signs* (Vilnius, 2002).

² ‘Dialogue’, 7, 27.

³ *Ibid.* 6.

other words, the entire concept of a Polish Wilno was based on religious and cultural perceptions, on an unrealistic image, a dream. Discount the Stefan Batory University and the Matka Boska Ostrobramska (the church of Our Lady of the Gate of the Dawn, one of the most popular Marian shrines of eastern Europe) and there is no longer a Polish Wilno.

For Tomas Venclova, less famous than Miłosz but still an important figure in the process of defining a modern collective Lithuanian identity, Vilnius is the one and only city.⁴ He acknowledges the peculiar paradox of Vilnius as both the historical capital of Lithuania and a frontier town, a capital city that, at its finest, ‘reminds one of a palimpsest—an ancient manuscript in which the text reveals traces of an earlier text’. Yet for him, as for most Lithuanians, Vilnius is ‘a symbol of continuity as well as of historical identity. . . . Lithuania without Vilnius is an ephemeral nation but with Vilnius, its past and its historical responsibility are secured.’⁵ However, in the Lithuanian case the gap between symbol and reality is much wider than that pertaining to the Polish vision of the city. In fact, Vilnius has hardly ever been Lithuanian in the demographic sense. Thus, for instance, in the late nineteenth century ethnic Lithuanians constituted only 2.1 per cent of the city’s population.⁶ Well aware of this problematic situation, Venclova illustrates it with an anecdote taken from his own childhood. Lost in the city’s unfamiliar alleys while trying to make his way home from school, he suddenly realized that hardly anyone understood him because he was speaking Lithuanian, or, as he put it, thousands of Lithuanians considered Vilnius to be their historical capital, but in reality the town was alien to them.⁷ In many ways the city’s role is reminiscent of that played by Jerusalem for the Jews over the centuries; as Venclova put it, ‘For the Lithuanians [Vilnius] is a symbol of continuity as well as historical identity—somewhat like Jerusalem.’⁸ But though the city fuelled and ignited the ethnic and national dreams of Lithuanians they did little to turn myth into reality.

Despite the importance of the city’s cultural dimension for the Poles and of its historical associations for the Lithuanians, both Miłosz and Venclova felt that their dualistic concept of Wilno/Vilnius was unsatisfactory. ‘Something’ was missing. This feeling led Miłosz to conclude that ‘Wilno is an enclave. It was neither Polish nor not-Polish, neither Lithuanian nor not-Lithuanian, neither a provincial nor a capital city. And, really, Wilno was an oddity, a city of mixed-up, overlapping regions.’⁹

⁴ See Tomas Venclova, *Vilnius* (Vilnius, 2001).

⁵ Ibid. 27.

⁶ Kevin O’Connor, *The History of the Baltic States* (Westport, 2003), 66; Šarūnas Liekis, *A State within a State? Jewish Autonomy in Lithuania 1918–1925* (Vilnius, 2003), 55.

⁷ Venclova, *Forms of Hope*, 18.

⁸ Ibid. 27.

⁹ Cited *ibid.* 7. See also Czesław Miłosz, ‘Vilnius, Lithuania: An Ethnic Agglomerate’, in George de Vos and Lola Romanucci-Ross (eds.), *Ethnic Identities: Cultural Continuities and Change* (Palo Alto, Calif., 1974), 339–52.

One might assume that the background to Miłosz's attempt to depict the city in such indeterminate colours was the wider unresolved historical dispute between Poles and Lithuanians over the ethnic and political identity of the 'Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth' (Rzeczpospolita), and of the 'polonized Lithuanians'.¹⁰ But it seems more likely that the missing part of the puzzle is the massive Jewish presence in Vilna before the Second World War. It is not that Miłosz or Venclova tried in any way to ignore or to underestimate the significance and importance of this presence. For both writers, the local Jewish quarter signified much more than an old residential area in which tens of thousands of Litvaks dwelled. 'In talking of Wilno', writes Miłosz, 'it is important to mention that it was an appreciably Jewish city.'¹¹ He saw this Jewishness, first and foremost, in such phenomena as the Jewish socialist organization, the Bund; the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut), founded in Vilna in 1925 and dedicated to the study of east European Jewish life; and the contribution of local Jews to the rebirth of Hebraism in Israel. Venclova, in turn, focused on the 'Jewish character' of Vilna by emphasizing the importance of the various Jewish cultural activities and institutions located there, such as the Romm printing house and the Strashun library. Such reflections are hardly surprising, considering the fact that in the inter-war period roughly a third of the local population was Jewish.¹² It is worth mentioning here that as early as 1975 Venclova published an essay entitled 'Jews and Lithuanians', which was nothing less than revolutionary in the Lithuanian and Soviet context of the time.¹³

While dreaming about their own Wilno or Vilnius, both writers willingly admitted, directly or indirectly, that the inter-war city had a triple identity: Wilno/Vilnius/Vilne.¹⁴ Its skyline was dominated by a virtual 'sacred triangle', composed of three huge monumental sites: the Matka Boska Ostrobramska church, surrounded every Sunday by thousands of Polish

¹⁰ See Saulius Kaubrys, *National Minorities in Lithuania* (Vilnius, 2002), 11–16, 79–85.

¹¹ Quoted in Venclova, *Forms of Hope*, 13. See also Alfonsas Tamulynas, 'The Demographic and Social-Professional Structure of the Jewish Community in Vilnius (Based on the Census of 1784)', in Izraelis Lempertas (ed.), *The Gaon of Vilnius and the Annals of Jewish Culture* (Vilnius, 1998), 331–53; David A. Frick, 'Jews and Others in Seventeenth-Century Wilno: Life in the Neighborhood', *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 12/1 (2005), 8–42.

¹² Israel Klausner, *Vilna, 'Jerusalem of Lithuania': From 1881 to 1939* [Vilna: yerushalayim delita, dorot aḥaronim 1881–1939] (Tel Aviv, 1983), 250.

¹³ On this essay see Mordechai Zalkin, 'Tomas Venclova: Jews and Lithuanians' (Heb.), *Iyunim betkumat yisra'el*, 14 (2004), 461–78.

¹⁴ The long period of the repressive Russian occupation left hardly any significant imprint on the city's character. For a 'Russian portrait' of Vilnius see e.g. A. Janikas (ed.), *Vilnius: Architektūra iki XX amžiaus pradžios* (Vilnius, 1955); Juozas Jurginis and Vladislavas Mikučianis, *Vilnius: Tarybų Lietuvos sostinė* (Vilnius, 1956). See also Remigijus Civinskas, 'Disputes between Jews and Townspeople in Lithuania and Russia's Policies Concerning Jews', in Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė and Larisa Lempertienė (eds.), *Central and East European Jews at the Crossroads of Tradition and Modernity* (Vilnius, 2006), 332–60.

pilgrims; the Lithuanian Gedimino Pilis (the castle of Gediminas, grand duke of Lithuania and founder of the city); and the Jewish Shulhoyf—the synagogue courtyard, the complex of the old main synagogue, and the various adjacent social and religious institutions. The symbolism of this ‘sacred triangle’ and, in fact, of the entire city was far-reaching. For the hundreds of thousands of Polish pilgrims who thronged every year to this ‘Civitas Dei’ to seek indulgences and absolution from the Baltic equivalent of the Polish Matka Boska Częstochowska (the Black Madonna of Częstochowa); for the Lithuanian peasant in a remote village in the northern region of Zemaitija who always dreamed about ‘Castle Hill’ as the symbol of Lithuanian statehood and independence but never saw it with his own eyes; and for the shtetl’s Jewish water-carrier, who envisioned the ‘Jerusalem of Lithuania’ as the world capital of Torah study and of elite scholarship, the city was a capital regardless of its formal status. It was the home of the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, of the patriarch of the Lithuanian National movement Jonas Basanavičius, and of Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, the Vilna Gaon. These various perceptions of the city inevitably influenced the attitude of its inhabitants towards the ‘other’, their known/unknown neighbours. To a significant extent the members of each of the three ethnic groups considered themselves not just as residents but also as having been ‘chosen’ by their co-religionists to guard the city from falling into the hands of these ‘others’; in other words, to serve as the guardians of the religious/national/scholarly treasure.

The multidimensional reality of Vilna was—and still is—deeply rooted in historical, literary, and artistic perceptions of the city.¹⁵ Thus, almost every book about it, whether it contains lithographs, paintings, or photographs, is dominated by the ethnic, religious, and national orientation of the artist or editor. This perception of separate cities characterizes, for instance, the works of Vladas Drėma, Piotr Popiński and Robert Hirsch, and Leyzer Ran.¹⁶ Predictably, each of these editors focuses almost solely on his own ‘imagined city’ while barely mentioning the city’s other quarters, or simply pushing them to the periphery.¹⁷ Another quite fascinating example of this

¹⁵ For a ‘Jewish history’ of the city see e.g. Ephim Jeshurin, *Wilno* (New York, 1935); Israel Cohen, *Vilna* (Philadelphia, 1943); and Israel Klausner, *Vilna, ‘Jerusalem of Lithuania’: From 1495 to 1881* [Vilna: yerushalayim delita, dorot rishonim 1495–1881] (Tel Aviv, 1983–88). For a literary treatment see e.g. Abraham Karpinovitch, *Tales of Vilna* [Sipurei vilna] (Tel Aviv, 1995).

¹⁶ See Vladas Drėma, *Dinges Vilnius* (Vilnius 1991); Piotr Popiński and Robert Hirsch, *Dawne Wilno na pocztówce* (Gdańsk, 1998); and Leyzer Ran, *Jerusalem of Lithuania: Illustrated and Documented* (New York, 1974). See also Moses Raviv (ed.), *A Jewish Street in Vilna* [Yidishe gass in vilne] (Zurich, 1931); Geinrikh Agranovsky, *Litovskii Ierusalim* (Vilnius, 1992); and Izraelis Lempertas, *Mūsų Vilne* (Vilnius, 2003).

¹⁷ See e.g. Vytautas Lissauskas, *Vilnius: Vokiečių gatvė* (Vilnius, 2003); Valentina Brio, ‘The Space of the Jewish Town in Zalman Shneur’s Poem *Vilna*’, in Jurgita Siaučionaitė-Verbickienė and Larisa Lempertienė (eds.), *Jewish Space in Central and Eastern Europe, Day-to-Day History* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2007), 254.

tendency is Jonas Kazimieras Vilčinskis's famous collection *Vilniaus albumas*, in which all the lithographs are by well-known nineteenth-century painters, such as Vasily Sadovnikov, Isador Laurent Deroy, Jan Chrucki, Konstantinas Kukevičius, and Victor Adam.¹⁸ Like Czesław Miłosz and Tomas Venclova, all these artists were well aware of the strong Jewish presence in Vilna. However, despite the visibility of Jewish life, it is barely represented in most of these colourful works, or, at best, is pushed to the shadowy margins of the scene.¹⁹

JERUSALEM IN LITHUANIA?

Symbolically, the virtual centre of the 'sacred triangle' was the main intersection of the Jewish quarter, at the meeting point of Gaono Street (Gaono gv.) and Glaziers Street (Stiklių gv.). Here, among the crowded bustle of female pedlars looking for potential customers, young children rushing to the *heder* or to school, and stooped artisans sitting on footstools in their dimly lit workshops, a Jew could feel, more than anywhere else in the city, the beating heart of the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania'. Yet they only needed to raise their eyes from the surrounding tumult for this illusion of a fully Jewish environment to vanish: they were constantly being 'watched' by the Matka Boska cross and the Lithuanian flag on the tower of Gedimino Pilis.

What, then, did the words 'Jerusalem of Lithuania' actually mean for Vilne's Jewish population? Did the Jews consider themselves sons and daughters of the city in the broadest sense? Or, to be more precise, did they relate to Vilne as did the Poles and the Lithuanians, in terms of 'ownership'? After all, they constituted the city's largest and most stable ethnic group. (Even when the idea of emigration to Palestine or elsewhere crossed their minds, it was, for most of them, as likely as not nothing more than a passing thought.)

An insight into how they saw themselves is provided by the comments of Hillel Noah Maggid-Steinschneider, very much a 'Vilner Yid', who dedicated his life to writing the history of the local Jewish community:

I have seen, and it is engraved upon my heart, that our city of Vilna is a magnificent city, and in it Torah and wisdom have combined from time immemorial. Within it, are yeshivas for Torah, *batei midrash* for wisdom, houses of prayer for worship, and many different charitable organizations. All people, from one end to

¹⁸ Jonas Kazimieras Vilčinskis, *Vilniaus albumas* (Vilnius, 1987); see nos. 5, 9, 19, 22, 12 respectively.

¹⁹ For the changing image of Jewish Vilnius in Lithuanian historiography, see Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė, 'Zydų Vilnius Lietuvos istoriografijoje: vaizdinių kaita', in Larisa Lempertienė et al. (eds.), *Jewish Intellectual Life in Pre-War Vilna* (Vilnius, 2004), 25–34.

the other, this one hither and that one thither, work as one, to increase and enhance Torah, so that the name of Israel shall not be forgotten.²⁰

Indeed, Maggid-Steinschneider perceived himself as a son of the city, a true Vilner, as well as its historian. His Vilne, however, was solely Jewish. Anything beyond the boundaries of the Jewish ethnic and cultural area, whether geographical or social, was irrelevant to him, and his works reflect the perception of the traditional Vilner Jew, for whom the boundaries of the world were identical with those of the local Jewish community. An expression of this awareness is to be found, for example, in a scene from the novel of the Vilne-born author Chaim Grade, *The Agunah*:

In order to get to the Jewish communal courtroom from Glazers Street [Stiklių gv.], Reb Shmuel-Munye had to pass German Street [Vokiečių gv.] and Vilna Street [Vilniaus gv.]. But he turned into Gaon Street [Gaono gv.], passed along gardens and churches, until he arrived at Mickiewicz Street [Gedimino gv.], where no Jew dares to show his face among those gentiles wearing curly mustaches. They were looking at his long black coat in contempt, as if he contaminated the air of their neighborhood. This so frightened him, his sarcastic smile disappeared into his beard like a sunray in a thicket. As there was no choice, he had to walk around three quarters of the city. Only when he finally disentangled himself from the camp of the uncircumcised and found his way to the Jewish communal offices, did the sarcastic smile return.²¹

Likewise for Joseph Buloff, the famous Yiddish actor, the boundaries of Jewish Vilne were identical to those of the old marketplace in Breite Gass (Didžioji gv.), the natural territory of orphans and abandoned children, stealing an apple or a piece of bread out of hunger.²² With Maggid-Steinschneider and Reb Shmuel-Munye, Buloff was acutely aware of the existence of his Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, and German neighbours, but they served merely as a background, at times vague and at times vivid and colourful, to the *real* world—the Jewish one. The points of communication and contact with life beyond that world were derived from the basic needs of daily life and not from a sense of neighbourly brotherhood. Indifference to the existence of the ‘other’ is one thing; but in the Jewish consciousness it went further: it was the elimination of the ‘others’ from the ‘local narrative’ that defined the way in which many Jews related to their native city.²³ Wilno/Vilnius/Vilne ‘belonged’ to everybody, but at the same time it

²⁰ Steinschneider, *The City Vilna* [Ir vilna] (Vilna, 1900), p. ix. On Steinschneider see Mordechai Zalkin, ‘Community—City—History: Hillel Noah Maggid and the Emergence of the Jewish “Vilner” Historiography’, in Lempertienė et al. (eds.), *Jewish Intellectual Life in Pre-War Vilna*, 7–24.

²¹ Chaim Grade, *The Agunah*, trans. Curt Leviant (New York, 1974), 119.

²² Joseph Buloff, *Tales from the Old Marketplace* [Mikikar hashuk hayashan] (Tel Aviv, 1986), 9.

²³ See Chaimas Nachmanas Šapira, *Vilnius naujojų žydų poezijos* (Kaunas, 1935).

'belonged' to nobody. All its inhabitants, regardless of their ethnic origins, were simultaneously insiders and outsiders—or, as Laimonas Briedis defined it recently, a city of strangers.²⁴ Thus the question of loyalty in this case has to be addressed in a more complex context. Even the local Jews who were culturally polonized did not identify as Poles, although they shared the same language, dialect, terminology, and, to a significant extent, even some cultural values, with their Polish neighbours. Anyone who is familiar with the local patriotic literature will be aware of the analogy between Mickiewicz's 'Litwo! Ojczyzna moja!' and Abraham Kariv's best-known essay, 'Lite mayne heymland'.²⁵

In terms of identity, however, most local Jews did not consider themselves citizens of Wilno but 'Vilner Yidn', sons and daughters of Vilne. 'Vilne' was not just the Jewish name for 'Wilno' or 'Vilnius'. It was a unique and specific entity. For the Jews, as for Miłosz, Vilne was an enclave in which the individual was entitled to define his or her own allegiance: their fidelity to their native city was loyalty to their *Jewish* city. And this loyalty was total, all-embracing, and unlimited, regardless of ideological, religious, or economic differences. Even the socialist, ideologically secular, and anti-clerical spirit that swept the streets of Jewish Vilne at the end of the nineteenth century did not undermine this deep sense of a common fate. Thus, when the poor young socialist Jewish shoemaker Hirsh Leckert was taken to the scaffold for the attempted assassination of the governor general of Vilna, Victor von Wahl, who had ordered the flogging of twenty-two Jewish and six Polish demonstrators and strikers, he was considered a martyr by all the city's Jews.

However, this loyalty was not just an expression of identification with the local community. Besides being members of the virtual fraternity of the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania', many of the city's Jews developed a deep sense of belonging to the 'earthly' Vilne, even a certain type of local patriotism.²⁶ This unique sense of 'joint belonging' that weaves amorphous feelings into the city's physical reality is admirably expressed in Moyshe Kulbak's famous poem 'Vilne':

You are a Psalm spelled in clay and iron,
A prayer in every stone, a chant, a melody in every wall,
You are an amulet darkly mounted in Lithuania,
A book is every stone, a scroll, a parchment is every wall.²⁷

²⁴ *Vilnius: City of Strangers* (Vilnius, 2008).

²⁵ Kariv's title also translates as 'Lithuania My Homeland'; published in his *Lithuania My Homeland* [Lita mekhorati] (Haifa, 1960).

²⁶ This tendency is very noticeable in Zalman Šik's book *A Thousand Years of Vilne* [1000 yor vilne] (Wilno, 1939).

²⁷ Cited in Arcadius Kahan, 'Vilna—the Sociocultural Anatomy of a Jewish Community in Interwar Poland', in id., *Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History*, ed. Roger Weiss (Chicago, 1986), 149–60: 149. See also Justin D. Cammy, 'The Politics of Home, the Culture of Place:

To borrow Tomas Venclova's words, 'The city merges with its setting.'²⁸ Surprisingly enough, these two seemingly contradictory environments coexisted peacefully. On the one hand, the reference to the city as the 'Jerusalem of Lithuania' was not just a phrase. Vilne Jews dreamed of Jerusalem and longed for it. For them, however, Vilne was, first and foremost, 'the promised land', a locally realized version of the ancient, eternal Jerusalem, earthly as well as heavenly. This image of Vilne crossed the boundaries of the local Jewish community, spreading throughout the Jewish Lithuanian cultural region. This was, for instance, the context of the poet Zalman Shneour's most famous expression: 'Vilne—my magnificent grandmother.'²⁹ On the other hand, however, this longing was transferred from the remote heavenly sphere to the immediate, mundane city. The Vilija river, the 'Hill of the Three Crosses', the green bridge ('der griner brik')—all these famous 'non-Jewish' symbols of the city gradually became part and parcel of their childhood scenery, of their very existence as sons and daughters of the 'real' city.

In the first half of the twentieth century the ongoing process of secularization among Jewish youth, combined with the almost irresistible attractiveness of contemporary Polish and Russian culture, led many young Jews to develop a new attitude towards their 'citizenship' of this multinational city. This process was characterized, first and foremost, by a strong ambition to 'leave' Vilne behind and to become citizens of 'The City'—of a non-religious entity. This desired destination could be reached via involvement in various 'neutral zones', that is to say, social areas that were considered open to everyone, regardless of their religious or ethnic identity.³⁰ One of the most attractive of these allegedly 'neutral' zones was the university. In fact, local Jews had attended the lecture halls of this institution as early as the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Most of these early students were adherents of the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment) and thus numbered only a few dozen.³¹ Now, some eighty years after these harbingers of the Haskalah 'introduced' the importance of secular higher education to the local ultra-conservative Jewish society, it seemed as if their dream was finally close to

The "Yung-Vilne" Miscellany of Literature and Art', in Marina Dmitrieva and Heidemarie Petersen (eds.), *Jüdische Kultur im Neuen Europa* (Wiesbaden, 2004), 117–33. For a different attitude see Samuel D. Kassow, 'The Uniqueness of Jewish Vilna', in Lempertienė et al. (eds.), *Jewish Intellectual Life in Pre-War Vilna*, 147–61: 150.

²⁸ Venclova, *Forms of Hope*, 16.

²⁹ Zalman Shneour, *Collected Writings* [Ketavim] (Tel Aviv, 1960), 240.

³⁰ A typical example of such a 'neutral' zone was the realm of popular sport. On the intensive activity of young Vilna Jews in this field in the inter-war period see Jack Jacobs, 'Jews and Sport in Interwar Vilna', in Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė and Lempertienė (eds.), *Jewish Space in Central and Eastern Europe*, 165–73.

³¹ Pinhas Kon, 'Jewish Students in the Former University of Vilna' (Yiddish), *Vilner Tog*, 6 Aug. 1923; Jacob Shatzky, *Cultural History of the Haskalah in Lithuania* [Kultur-geschichte fun der haskole in lite] (Buenos Aires, 1950), 58–63.

realization. Thus, as a natural continuation of the mass participation of Jewish youth in the modern, to a certain extent secular, local school system,³² in the inter-war period Yiddish became as popular as Polish in the courtyards of the University of Vilnius. About a thousand local Jewish students (25 per cent of the total enrolment) turned their backs on the local traditional Jewish educational and vocational institutions in favour of the faculties of medicine, the sciences, and the humanities.

In this context the attendance of a large number of Jewish students at Stefan Batory University represents much more than just a new trend of professional preference. To a significant extent their decision to mingle, day in day out, with multicultural and multinational groups of non-Jewish students in a non-Jewish environment testifies to their weakened traditional and religious sense of belonging. These Jewish students needed to cross the unseen local boundaries and become true 'insiders'. The impact of this phenomenon on the texture of Jewish society was so profound that many considered it to be a sign of the possible disintegration of that society. This process, described by the poet Hayim Nahman Bialik as one in which 'They were all swept by a foreign spirit; they were all taken away by the light',³³ in fact reflected a realistic analysis of contemporary social developments. Like their Jewish counterparts who made every possible effort to become members of the Russian socialist movements, they longed for a new 'neutral' urban society that welcomed every caring and involved citizen regardless of his or her ethnic or religious identity.

On the surface, and in the spirit of the years following the First World War, these widespread hopes for a new social order, at least in the local context, were not baseless. By the early 1920s the currents of socialism and cosmopolitanism, so prevalent in contemporary eastern Europe, were perceived by many—Jews and non-Jews alike—as the way towards establishing an equal and humane society. Such beliefs were very popular among the circles of young Jews in Vilnius, the birthplace of the Bund, and naturally, in particular, among these students.³⁴ And yet, according to historian Arcadius Kahan, 'Hope for a positive response to this historic opportunity for a multinational cultural coexistence and cross-fertilization, at least in the area of the humanities and cultural studies, was short-lived.'³⁵ Following the emotion-laden

³² Kaubrys, *National Minorities in Lithuania*, 140–71.

³³ Hayim Nahman Bialik, *Collected Poems 1899–1934* [Shirim 1899–1934] (Tel Aviv, 1990), 131.

³⁴ See Vladimir Levin, 'Jewish Politics in the Russian Empire during the Period of Reaction 1907–1914' [Hapolitika hayehudit ba'imperyah harusit be'idan hare'aktseyah 1907–1914], Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2007; Isaac Broides, *Zionist Vilna and its Functionaries* [Vilna hatsiyonit ve'askaneiha] (Tel Aviv, 1939), 295.

³⁵ Arcadius Kahan, 'The University of Vilna', in id., *Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History*, 165–9: 165.

Polish–Lithuanian struggle for Vilnius, in the nationalistic atmosphere of inter-war Polish Wilno, the idea of a ‘neutral’ urban society was no more than a mirage. Moreover, relationships between different ethnic groups deteriorated rapidly, and, as Tomas Venclova wrote, ‘all ethnic groups except the Poles were increasingly isolated and ousted to the fringes of society’.³⁶ Thus the struggle over the nature of the city became a constant point of contention. During the 1930s the fragile threads of the local social web gradually disintegrated, and the citizens of this ‘Civitas Dei’—the Poles, the Lithuanians, the Belorussians, the Russians, and the Jews—all constituted their own old-new Vilnius/Wilno/Vilne/Vilna.

³⁶ Venclova, *Vilnius*, 59.