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A Selection from Zalmen Szyk's *Toyznt yor Vilne*[1]

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The cover of Zalmen Syk's *Toyznt yor Vilne. Ershter teyl*, Vilne, 1939.

Zalmen Szyk (? – May 8, 1942) was a Yiddish journalist, committed Esperantist, the chairman of the Vilnius Branch of the Jewish Landkentenish Society (Jewish Local Lore Society), and a city guide. The projected three-volume edition of *Toyznt yor Vilne* ('Millennial Vilna') was his life's work. In 520 densely printed pages, the first volume covered all the historical landmarks, urban habitats, flora and fauna, topography, architecture, and ethnography of Wilno-Vilna-Vilnius, enhanced by generous selections of poetry in Yiddish and Polish, photographs, inscriptions, and facsimiles. When Szyk fled Vilnius for Lida in the wake of the German invasion, he was carrying the manuscript of the second volume, dedicated to Jewish communal and institutional life in the city. The third was to have been given over entirely to photographs. And the title said it all. Although written in Yiddish solely for the benefit of Jewish tourists, *Toyznt yor Vilne* was designed to be a Baedeker guide equal to any other[2].

1 Zalmen Szyk, *Toyznt yor Vilne. Ershter teyl,* Vilne: Gezelshaft far landkentenish in Poyln, Vilner opteylung, 1939.

2 *Verlag Karl Baedeker* was a German publishing house pioneering from the 1830s on in the business of worldwide travel guidebooks which were often referred to simply as 'Baedekers'.

In the Jewish scheme of things, a millennium didn't amount to much, since 1939 corresponded to 5699 in the Jewish calendar, but as Christian Europe went, a thousand years represented the promise of eternity. Although Szyk allocated sufficient room to documenting Vilna's claim to being the Jerusalem of Lithuania, the millennium announced on the title page was a paradigm shift in the Jewish conception of time and space.

Founded in Poland in 1926, *Landkentenish* (Pol. *Krajoznawstwo*) was the Jewish movement to promote touring the Polish countryside in order to instill knowledge of the land and its historic landmarks. *Landkentenish* brought together two disparate ideological strands: the Enlightenment ideal of return to nature and the new nationalism that laid exclusive claim to the land and its historic landmarks. Because Jews were not welcome in the Polish Local Lore Society (Pol. *Polskie Towarzystwo Krajoznawcze*), and because the preservation of Jewish landmarks was never part of its mandate, Jewish historians, ethnographers, novelists, poets, and other engagé intellectuals formed their own Polish society and issued their own publications: *Land un lebn* ('Country and Life',1927–1928), edited by Yitskhok Lejpuner, as well as the bilingual *Landkentenish / Krajoznawstwo* ('Local Lore', 1933-1938) edited by the young historian, Emanuel Ringelblum. Vilna seems to have been at the epicenter of the movement, because two of its most impressive publications were published there: Hirsh Mac's *Kurerter un turistik in Poyln* ('Health Resorts and Tourism in Poland', 1935), complete with advice from 16 medical doctors about which Polish spas and regions were best suited to cure particular ailments, and Szyk's *Toyznt yor Vilne*. Besides its summer and winter resorts, and its hiking, skiing, and kayaking expeditions that appealed to a small but growing urban middle class, the *Landkentenish* movement laid claim to the land entire.

Toyznt yor Vilne has as much, if not more, to teach the contemporary reader as its intended consumer. Like Szyk, we walk in a city where Yiddish matters. It is not only one language among equals. Yiddish is also the one language best suited to mediate the fiercely competing claims on the past, present and future of the city. Like Szyk, we delight in the juxtaposition of sacred and secular, rich and poor, popular and highbrow, center and periphery, fact and fiction. Like Syzk, we try to imagine a vital Jewish presence in Vilna on the threshold of a new millennium. As is evident even from the brief selections that are translated here, in 1939, Jewish Vilna was gearing up to celebrate. After years of neglect and mismanagement,

the spanking new Communal Bathhouse was about to reopen, and the Stars of David made of perforated pipes, recently installed over the gates to the Synagogue Courtyard, would light up the evening sky.

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Brief as they are, the excerpts that follow illustrate the diversity of Szyk's guidebook, his in-depth knowledge of the city and his ability to straddle both sides of the fence: the Polish-Christian and the Jewish. When read in English translation, much of *Toyznt yor Vilne* barely betrays its Jewish origins. It reads like a guidebook that happens to have been written in Yiddish. *Ostra Brama* seems an obvious point of departure for every tourist. To this day, the Gates of Dawn is the main and most striking remnant of the Medieval fortifications to the city. But just inside the gate, as Joanna Degler (Lisek) makes clear in her article in this issue, where she compares Syzk's volume with Polish-language guidebooks to Vilnius, is a Catholic shrine, a major pilgrimage site, which Polish Jews could visit only at their peril. (My father, then a bespectacled Polish Jewish student at Stefan Batory University, was beaten up on *Ostrabramska* Street by Polish hooligans for not removing his hat.) Once inside the shrine, moreover, the Jewish tourist would be met with walls covered in miniature hearts and limbs, donated to the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of Mercy by grateful pilgrims, a stark reminder of the pagan images that the Hebrew Bible had strictly forbidden. Four days later, at the tail end of the itinerary (No. 42 on Szyk's list), the truly dedicated tourist was encouraged to visit one of two factories: either a plywood factory or the Elektrit, which produced radiobroadcast receivers. The *Landkentenish* mandate called upon Jews to celebrate life-in-the-present and not to dwell entirely in the past. Although hardly an industrial town, Wilno-Vilna-Vilnius could still offer the tourist an inside glimpse into the future. So Szyk's millennium can also be read as a millenarian document, a kind of utopian blueprint for a secular and self-confident Jewish presence in Poland.

At the same time, of course, Szyk was eager to display his inside knowledge of Jewish culture and civilisation. Since the Synagogue Courtyard, the physical and symbolic center of Jerusalem of Lithuania, is referred to in virtually every article that follows, we have seen fit to translate Szyk's memorable depiction thereof, which reveals both his ear for the spoken vernacular (old Jews talking), and his eye for the hidden continuities between the shtetl and the urban ghetto.

Finally, of the several dozen streets and alleys that Syzk traverses house by house, I chose *Trocka* Street (now *Trakai* Street), for two reasons: (1) To illustrate Joanna Degler's (Lisek) thesis of Szyk's strong Polish sympathies and (2) because my mother, Masha Welczer, was born inside the courtyard of two 'bulvanes' that guarded the entrance to the Tyszkiewicz Palace. A tourist venturing into the courtyard circa 1912 would have found: the Press of Fradl Matz and Yisroel Welczer (my grandparents), Kochanowski's Kindergarten, Badaness's Bakery, a Jewish orphanage, and at the right time of day would have heard the sound of one of my aunts practicing at the piano.