

JUSTIN CAMMY

# The Prose of Everyday Life: Moyshe Levin's Vilna Peoplescapes

<https://doi.org/10.51554/Coll.21.48.15>

---

*Annotation:* This article introduces readers to the fiction by Moyshe Levin, a member of the Yiddish literary and artistic group Yung Vilne (Young Vilna). I argue that Levin challenged sentimental myths of Vilna as a centre of Yiddish culture by crafting naturalist fiction and reportage focused on the struggles of Vilna's Jewish underclass and workers. In doing so, he developed a fictional universe that was directly engaged with and explored the social and political challenges of local Jewish life in the 1930s.

*Keywords:* Moyshe Levin, Ber Sarin, Yiddish fiction, Yung Vilne.

---

## Introduction

If the international reputation of the literary group Yung Vilne (Young Vilna, 1929–1941) was a function of its Modernist poets, it was Moyshe Levin (1907–1942), its main fiction writer, who secured the group's populist credentials by taking up the prosaic reality of daily life.<sup>1</sup> Though prose occupied a secondary position to poetry in the aesthetic hierarchy of Yung Vilne (a point accentuated in the 1936 issue of its journal, which employed a different typeface to

---

1 For more on Yung Vilne, see Justin Cammy, 'The Politics of Home, the Culture of Place: Yung Vilne, A Journal of Literature and Art (1934–1936)', in: *Judische Kultur(en) im Neuen Europa: Wilna 1918–1939*, Marina Dmitrieva, Heidemarie Petersen, eds., Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004, p. 117–133; 'Tsevorfene bleter: The Emergence of Yung Vilne', in: *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry 14*, Antony Polonsky, ed., London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001, p. 170–191. Yung Vilne's poets outnumbered its prose writers, and they were better known for their experimentation, especially the parodist Leyzer Volf, the neo-prophetic Chaim Grade, the neoromantic Avrom Sutzkever, and the Symbolist Elkhonen Vogler.

distinguish verse from fiction), Levin's naturalist tales and reportage were an expression of the group's leftist political inclinations, its social engagement, and its immersion in the material and political challenges of Jewish life in Vilna in the 1930s. During its period of most feverish production, the group's writers were all in their 20s or early 30s. Almost all of them were from working-class families and neighbourhoods, and several were orphans. They were torn between the heady dreams and ambition of youth, and frustration that the real action in Yiddish literature was taking place elsewhere, across the border in the Soviet Union, or in larger urban centres, such as Warsaw and New York. Levin's writing challenged sentimental readings of his home town that were part of a carefully curated interwar myth of place, one encouraged by the city's leading Jewish intellectuals and emigré writers, that promoted Vilna as the unofficial capital of Yiddishland. The city's cultural mythos was a function of its respect for, and synthesis of, several centuries and layers of intellectual and cultural creativity. These included: its reputation for rabbinic scholarship embodied by Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, the Gaon of Vilna; its importance as vanguard centre of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah); its various publishing houses that exported modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature throughout the Jewish world; its renowned modern libraries, such as Strashun and Mefitsey-haskole, that served as new sites of Jewish learning and scholarship; and its political status as the founding city of the Jewish-socialist Bund. By the interwar period, the synthesis between tradition and innovation that defined the 'Vilna way' (*nusekh-Vilne*) was bolstered by a cadre of Yiddishist activists and scholars, who pointed to the city's secular Yiddish school system (including a Yiddish high school and teacher training college), its robust Yiddish press, and the establishment there of the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO), the preeminent institution for the study of Yiddish-speaking Jewry in the world, as evidence of Vilna's status as a vanguard centre of secular Jewish humanism. By the time Zalmen Reyzen, the editor of *Vilner tog*, introduced the Yung Vilne generation in its pages in 1929, its members were already working in the shadows of a deep tradition of hagiographic writing about their home town, only recently complicated by Moyshe Kulbak's ode 'Vilne' (1926) which invited a reading of the city's Jewish topography as a sacred text ('You are an amulet set deep in Lithuania', 'You are the Book of Psalms'), and culminated in a neoromantic

yoking together of speaker and subject: 'I am your grey, I am your dark flame, I am the city!'<sup>2</sup>

How was an aspiring Yiddish writer like Moyshe Levin expected to navigate his responsibilities towards what Kulbak's ode had referred to as Vilna's 'grey myth'? And how was he to reconcile the advertisement of his city as an embodiment of the hopes of secular Jewish culture with his direct exposure to its intense poverty and rising Polish nativism that called the Jews' place in Vilna (and in Poland more broadly) into question?<sup>3</sup> In this essay and my accompanying translations, the first to analyse and introduce Levin's fiction to a broader audience, I argue that Levin's prose establishes a countermyth through *his* experience of Vilna from the ground up. The condition of his subjects is frequently one of anomie and alienation, and the city itself, from the dirty, claustrophobic streets of the traditional Jewish quarter to the poor neighbourhood of Sophianikes dotted with brothels and rotting houses, is often portrayed as complicit in their dehumanisation. Levin simultaneously reveals serious generational, political and economic divides within the local community that call into question the ability of Vilna as a leading Yiddish cultural centre to sustain itself.

## Moyshe Levin and the Yung Vilne generation

Born in Vilna in 1907, Levin was the youngest child of a poor, deaf glazier. Like many of his fellow Yung Vilne colleagues, his family spent the years of the First World War, when Vilna was occupied by Germany, as refugees in Russia.

---

2 Zalmen Szyk's *Toyznt yor Vilne* (A Thousand Years of Vilna, 1939) included a dozen Yiddish poems about Vilna, suggesting that even late in the decade, newer writers renegotiated its myth of place against previous models. For more on the representation of Vilna in modern Yiddish literature, see Justin Cammy, 'Foreword', in: *Vilna My Vilna: Stories by Abraham Karpinowitz*, translated by Helen Mintz, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015, p. ix-xxiii; Avraham Novershtern, 'Shir halel, shir kina: dimuya shel Vilnah be-shirat yidish bein shtei milhamot ha'olam', in: *Mi-Vilna li-Yerushalayim. Mehkarim be-toldoteyhem uve-tarbutam shel yehude Mizrah Eropa mugashim le-profesor Shmuel Verses*, David Asaf, Israel Bartal, Avner Holtzman, eds., Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002, p. 485-511.

3 For more on the effects of anti-semitism in this period, see Emanuel Melzer, *No Way Out: The Politics of Polish Jewry, 1935-1939*, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1997.

When they returned home, Moyshe was enrolled in the Leyzer Gurevitsh elementary school, part of the city's secular Yiddish educational system. After his graduation in 1922, he was apprenticed as a photograph retoucher, and then attended the Vladimir Medem Teachers Seminary. Levin worked as a teacher in the Bundist-affiliated secular Yiddish secular school system (TsYSho) from 1928 until 1934, when the authorities revoked his teaching license after accusing him of membership in an illegal political organisation. Though the incident forced him to spend long days in the photography studio to support himself, it also gave him time to dedicate to his writing and to illustrating.<sup>4</sup>

Levin's older brother, a quirky personality known about town as Itsik the Glazier, was best friends with Henekh Soloveytshik, one of Yung Vilne's original members, who also wrote fiction. It was through Henekh that Moyshe was introduced to this nascent group of poets, writers and artists. Though he was fortunate not to suffer from the same paralysis of the hand and leg as his older brother Itsik, Moyshe was hearing-impaired (his father was completely deaf), forcing his colleagues to shout to get his attention. What is more, his nasal voice was not the most dignified attribute for a young man who wished to communicate grim experience through his art. Nonetheless, Levin's warmth, productivity and concern with the everyday struggles of ordinary Jews would provide the group with an important source of local legitimacy, and endear him to audiences.<sup>5</sup> He lived with his parents in their humble flat, and wrote about the working class, based on first-hand observation and experience. His brand of realism appealed to the local Yiddish press, as well as to Yiddish publications elsewhere thirsty for an unvarnished window into life in Vilna.<sup>6</sup>

---

4 *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, Vol. 5, New York: Alveltlekher yidisher kultur-kongres, 1963, p. 289. While he was still a student in elementary school, his teachers encouraged him to publish stories in Warsaw's *Yugnt veker* (The Young Worker) and *Kleyne folkstsaytung* (The Young Peoples' Paper), both Bundist publications.

5 His Yung Vilne colleague Elkhonen Vogler recalls that 'when his turn came to read to the packed hall at our yearly [Yung Vilne] public evenings, his innocent charm was a big hit with the audience. He would finish and raise his head, but he could not hear the ovation due to a disability inherited from his family. Nonetheless, he was the most successful of his brothers, and could be seen about town with a young woman from Poplaves Street.' Elkhonen Vogler, 'Di mishpokhe Yung Vilne', *Di goldene keyt*, 1955, No 23, p. 178.

6 Levin's professional debut was in *Vilner tog* in 1927. Over the next decade, his stories continued to appear locally in its pages, in addition to *Vilner vokh* (1931), *A Kurts* (1934), *Yung Vilne* (1934–1936), *Etyudn* (1935–1937), and *Zibn teg* (1935–1936); in Warsaw, his writing

## Yung Vilne and Yiddish prose

Though poets and visual artists dominated the membership of Yung Vilne, Levin was not its only prose writer. When his older brother Itsik introduced him to his friend Henekh Soloveytshik in 1928, he found a young man with proletarian sympathies who also shared his interest in fiction. They would meet up on Saturdays with another new recruit, the poet Elkhonen Vogler, and with the visual artist Bentsye Mikhtom. Itsik Levin always made sure to have a flask on hand to lighten the atmosphere as they spent the Sabbath afternoon arguing about literature and politics.<sup>7</sup> Soloveytshik, who worked summers in the countryside, often invited them to join him at his summer home, allowing time off from the pressures of work and city life. Soloveytshik's regular work at Balberiski's tobacco factory ensured that they were in constant supply of cigarettes, as befitted a gang of young writers and artists. Soloveytshik was born in a small town just outside of Vilna's city limits, and he retained the earthy aura of someone influenced by life in the provinces. His stories were often set in the countryside, and featured healthy peasants working the land, establishing an interest in the Vilna region's multinationalism as one of the group's thematic concerns. At one of Yung Vilne's public readings in the Real Gymnasium in the early 1930s, Soloveytshik appeared in tall boots and in a short pelt, having just returned from the provinces. He dropped his heavy sack on to the stage, and began to recite a new story about a peasant who murders the nobleman who attempted to seduce his daughter. The entire audience was consumed by its invitation into a non-Jewish world that was in their own backyard but very distant from their experience of urban life. When Soloveytshik reached the point in the narrative where the peasant's axe was about to come crashing down on the lecherous nobleman, a dark stream of blood began to trickle out from his sack on to the stage and down into the audience. Those in the front rows jumped out of their seats in fear, thinking he had brought the nobleman's head with him. In fact, the potato sack contained several frozen calf heads he had brought with him from the provinces, and they had begun to thaw during his reading.

---

was published in *Varshever velt-shpigl*, *Folkstsaytung*, *Vokhnshrift far literatur*, *Faroys* and *Der fraynd*; in New York, stories appeared in *Di Tsukunft* and *Forverts*, the latter awarding him a prize for 'Dray shpiglen' (Three Mirrors) in 1937.

7 Shloyme Belis, 'Bay di onheybn fun Yung Vilne', *Di goldene keyt*, 1980, No 101, p. 24–26.

The early stories that Soloveytshik published in late 1928 in the Warsaw journal *Oyfgang* dealt with the lives of local peasants and non-Jewish villagers. But he grew restless with what he considered the stagnant economic and creative opportunities in Vilna. In 1932, he smuggled himself across the Polish-Soviet border, part of a wave of several hundred local Jewish youths who moved to the Soviet Union that year, mesmerised by the promise of universal emancipation. Despite the fact that their time together was short-lived, Soloveytshik's insistence that there were local stories in need of telling made a strong impression on Levin, as did his political commitments. His sudden departure cleared the field for Levin to make his mark as Yung Vilne's main fiction writer, albeit with another formidable competitor.

Though not yet a household name when he joined the ranks of Yung Vilne in late 1929, Shmerke Kaczerginski was already the anonymous troubadour of the masses. His lyrics to popular songs like 'Fathers, Mothers, Little Children' spoke the language of the disenfranchised, and it was not long before he was affectionately referred to about town as Comrade Shmerke.<sup>8</sup> An orphan with no parents to worry about, Kaczerginski fell in with the communist underground while still a teenager. His charisma, gregariousness and social activism made him a natural leader.

Kaczerginski excelled most at reportage, a popular literary genre at the intersection of fiction and journalism, which drew from personal experience and observation to explore discrete corners of everyday life. It allowed him to describe life in Vilna's streets and back alleys, focus attention on the experience of the Jewish worker, and renew collective pride in Vilna's importance as a centre of East European Jewish culture, by writing about such local institutions as the Romm printing press. In one such reportage from May 1931, he used his professional training as a lithographer to report on an uprising at a local print shop. He showed how older workers, many of them long-time members of the Bund, argued that the factory was in such financial trouble that if they demanded more compensation it could be forced to close and everyone would find themselves out of work. By contrast, the younger workers, with whom Kaczerginski sympathised, branded the older workers spineless. The dispute

---

8 'Tates, mames, kinderlekh', in: *Shmerke Kaczerginski ondenk-bukh*, Buenos Aires: A komitet, 1955, p. 229–230. For a spirited recording of this song, see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_W59HvL\\_bJo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_W59HvL_bJo).

eventually burst into a riot, forcing the factory bosses to call the police to restore order. This intervention led Kaczerginski to conclude with the bitterly ironic final line (also the piece's title) '*Alts in bestn ordenung*' (All's well that ends well). The story revealed real-time disputes about labour strategy and solidarity among Jewish workers.<sup>9</sup> Kaczerginski also introduced his brand of activist, politically minded reportage into the pages of *Yung Vilne*. For example, 'Amnesty'<sup>10</sup> drew from his experience in jail to present the plight of political prisoners. His most ambitious submission to *Yung Vilne* magazine, 'Moniek in his Circle',<sup>11</sup> departed from reportage by offering a fictional portrait of a generational malaise. Its anti-hero, the lazy student Moniek, blames all his failures on an offhand remark by a German-language instructor about Yiddish as a degenerate language. He uses this opportunity to rouse his friends 'not to study one word of German because it dishonours our national culture', even though he has never devoted a moment to the advancement of Yiddish culture. Moniek is quick with excuses and short on action. On the one hand, his mixture of Polish curses and idiomatic street Yiddish showcased Kaczerginski's ear for local vernacular. On the other hand, if Moniek and his crew of disengaged under-achievers represented a broader generational lack of self-respect and motivation, Kaczerginski offered *Yung Vilne* a corrective through the way it modelled new Yiddish creativity and social responsibility.

Kaczerginski was *Yung Vilne*'s main organiser and the editor of its journal. When he was arrested in 1936 and sent to the city's Lukiszki prison for content in the third issue of *Yung Vilne* magazine that was deemed by the Polish authorities to be seditious, he was so well liked that much of the city's Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia, even those who disagreed with him politically, rallied to his support until he was released. Under the pseudonym S. Noymes, he also served as Polish correspondent for the New York communist Yiddish daily *Morgn frayhayt*, and also contributed to the Warsaw daily *Undzer shtime* and *Fraynt*. By the late 1930s, he was at work on an ambitious novel about the fate of his generation, *Yugnt on freyd* (Youth without Joy), but the manuscript was lost during the war.

9 Shmerke Kaczerginski, 'Alts in bestn ordenung', *Literarische tribune*, Lodz, 1931, date and page unknown.

10 [Shmerke Kaczerginski], Khaver Shmerke, 'Amnestye', *Yung Vilne*, 1934, No 1, p. 25–28.

11 [Shmerke Kaczerginski], Khaver Shmerke, 'Moniek in zayn svive', *Yung Vilne*, 1936, No 3, p. 68–78.

In the end, Kaczerginski's natural talents as an organiser and his focus on his journalism did not provide him with the attention he needed to fully realise his artistry. Though his name appeared with some regularity in the domestic and international Yiddish press, he was the only core member of Yung Vilne during its period of greatest productivity (1934–1940) who did not publish an independent volume under his own name, a source of significant frustration, considering that the core members of the group he so carefully promoted had already published several books by 1940.<sup>12</sup> With no real competitor as a fiction writer, Moyshe Levin stepped into the void.

### Moyshe Levin and Yiddish naturalism

When established Yiddish prose master Yoysef Opatoshu read one of Levin's stories in a 1937 issue of *Literarische bleter*, he dropped the young man an admiring letter, which Levin carried around with him in his breast pocket like a good-luck charm.<sup>13</sup> Opatoshu, whose early works 'Romance of a Horse Thief' (1912) and 'From the New York Ghetto' (1914) paved new ground for Yiddish naturalism, saw a younger version of himself in Levin's stark descriptions of Vilna and his willingness to get beneath the romantic veneer of Jewish life. Still in his mid-20s, Levin was a throwback to a pre-existing tradition of Yiddish naturalism in Poland, one that also suffered from an admixture of sentimentalism, as seen in writers such as Sholem Asch.<sup>14</sup>

12 Kaczerginski's major contribution to Yiddish prose would come later in the form of his memoiristic work related to the destruction of Vilna and the repression of Soviet Yiddish culture, and in his ethnographic work collecting oral testimonies from survivors and Yiddish songs of the ghettos and camps. See *Khurbm Vilne: umkum fun di yidn in Vilne in vilner gegnt*, New York: Tsiġo bikher-farlag, 1947; *Partizaner geyen: fartseykhenungen fun Vilner geto*, Buenos Aires: Tsentral farband fun poylishe yidn in Argentin, 1947; *Tsvishn hamer un serp: tsu der geshikhte fun der likvidatsye fun der Yidisher kultur in Sovetn-Rusland*, Paris: Aroysgegebn durkh a grupe fraynd fun Vilne, 1949; *Lider fun di getos un lagern*, New York, 1948; and *Ikh bin geven a partizan: Di grine legende*, Buenos Aires, 1952. For additional material published by Kaczerginski, see *Shmerke Kaczerginski: ondenk-bukh*, Buenos Aires: Aroysgegebn fun a komitet, 1955.

13 Avrom Sutzkever, *Baym leyenen penimer*, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1993, p. 55.

14 For more on Yiddish naturalism, see Yekhiel Yeshaye Trunk, *Idealizm un naturalizm in der yidisher literatur*, Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1927.



Bentsye Mikhtom,  
Cover, in Moyshe Levin,  
*Friling in kellershtub*,  
Vilne, 1937.

Since Levin's stories adhere tightly to actual places, personalities and events, some of them precisely dated, his prose also existed on the borderline of reportage, a popular genre in Eastern Europe, and especially among Yiddish writers such as his colleague Kaczerginski. Indeed, it is possible that had he been allowed to develop his talents further, Levin might have been to Vilna what a figure like Perets Opoczynski was to Warsaw, or Josef Zerkowicz was to Lodz. Both saw reportage as a form of creative, engaged journalism, in which a writer guided readers through new peoplescapes and corners of Jewish life, often with a satirical, ironic or ethnographic eye.<sup>15</sup>

Levin was unabashedly *Vilnerish* (of Vilna) in his writings. 'Springtime in the Cellar' (*Friling in kellershtub*),<sup>16</sup> his 1937 collection of short stories and

15 See 'In those nightmarish days: the ghetto reportage of Peretz Opoczynski and Josef Zerkowicz', Samuel D. Kassow, ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

16 For two sample reviews of *Friling in kellershtub*, see [Shmerke Kaczerginski], Khaver Shmerke, 'Horepashnikes kukn dikh on!', *Vilner tog*, 16 October 1936; M. Taykhman, 'Der reyekh fun vilner oremkayt', *Litarishe bleter*, 2 April 1937, p. 228–229.

humoresques illustrated by his Yung Vilne colleague Bentsye Mikhtom, was so sated with local atmosphere that it included a short lexicon of terms that were part of the city's Litvak street vernacular for the benefit of Yiddish readers elsewhere. His descriptions of the natural beauty of the Vilna region often served as a counterpoint to the material ugliness in which its citizens were forced to live, as in a story he submitted to Warsaw's *Literarische bleter*:

Vilna, Poland. Zavalna Street. Courtyard 18. Apartment 10. Yankl Tsipin. The neighbourhood church steeples scratch the heavens. The Viliya River extends through forests, hills and fields like a silver ribbon. The courtyard is enclosed by crumbling brick walls. A garbage pit in the middle is inhabited by two tomcats. Steps lead up from the ground floor to the second and third floors, and then to an attic apartment, number 10, where a faded sign reads: 'Men's Tailor'.<sup>17</sup>

Levin situates the story with precision, contrasting the illusion of grace painted by the city's steeples and the natural beauty of its region against the material reality of a poor artisan's dingy garret apartment. However, even amid material want, Levin reveals genuine sources of warmth that defined his community. The sketch goes on to describe an exchange of letters between the tailor and his wife Beyle ('whose eyes were always wet, as if they were dipped in horseradish') and their son Shimon, who has fallen ill while studying in France. As Yankl and Beyle receive increasingly desperate letters from abroad, they bemoan their inability to go and rescue their son, or to pay for his adequate medical care. A story that seems to hint at a tragic ending, a child of Vilna dying alone, is rescued in its final paragraph by the nourishment of home: 'The train sounds its whistles through the countryside, from Vilna to Grodno, from Bialystok to Warsaw and on to Berlin, through fields and forests, through day and night, bringing packages of money, letters, books, and, for the student Shimon Tsipin in Cannes, a big white roll stuffed with Mother's secrets.'<sup>18</sup> The taste of home comes to represent the organic wholesomeness that the student left behind in Vilna before falling ill in the West. In so doing, Levin warned those who sought out greener pastures elsewhere of the potential dangers they faced in uprooting themselves from their community when it needed them most.

<sup>17</sup> 'Gal' (Bitterness), *Literarische bleter*, 26 February 1937, p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Levin's prose draws in the reader through shocking explorations of the tribulations of fellow working-class Jews. The grim fate of Motye the Coachman<sup>19</sup> (translated below) is such that its opening paragraph conflates him with his horse. While his customers possess sufficient means to enjoy the modern town's Jazz Age clubs, others in Vilna fare much worse.<sup>20</sup> Levin's story is not concerned with the city's dynamic intellectual and cultural life that were the envy of the Yiddish-speaking world. Rather, the street consumes both of Motye's daughters: due to the family's poverty, one is lost to prostitution, and the other is awakened to political radicalism. Through this story, which marked Levin's debut in the pages of *Yung Vilne*, Levin warns that the myth of place and Vilna's lived experience are entirely separate.<sup>21</sup>

Levin's leftist sympathies made him especially keen to explore the corrosive effects of class conflict on Jewish communal solidarity. The title story of his prose collection *Friling in kellershtub* opens with the effects of spring floods on an impoverished neighbourhood that lay along the banks of the Vilenke River (Vilnia), a tributary to the city's main Viliya River (Neris). The threat is particularly severe to the inhabitants of this area, because so many of them live below the flood line in dank cellars, or in structures already damaged by years of neglect. Its climax comes when an underemployed labourer refuses to leave for higher ground, when members of the Jewish community's volunteer flood committee urge him to evacuate. His invective is a flood of a different sort: 'Why don't you ever come down to this neighbourhood on ordinary days?! Or every day! Our life is constantly in danger, and not just from too much water, but from too much

---

19 'Motye droshker', *Yung Vilne*, 1934, No 1, p. 9–18; reprinted in Moyshe Levin, *Friling in kellershtub*, Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1937, p. 77–86.

20 See 'Two Posters' about an unemployed man who spends his days walking the city carrying a film poster on a stick advertising screenings at a local cinema. The work is humiliating, since passers-by are more interested in the colourful poster than in making eye contact with the man holding it. In the end, he is overcome by the wind beating down on his poster like a sail while he attempts to battle the traffic and cross Broad Street. He collapses from exhaustion in a doorway, while the poster conceals its anonymous holder. See 'Tsvey afishn', *Yung Vilne*, 1936, No 3, p. 86–90.

21 After the Second World War, Abraham Karpinowitz, who had been raised in Vilna, would take up where Levin had left off, by exploring Jewish prostitution and the underworld in Vilna in such tales as 'The Lineage of the Vilna Underworld' and 'Tall Tamara'. See *Vilna My Vilna*, p. 94–100, 108–116.

hunger!<sup>22</sup> Here again, Levin is less interested in the cultural extraordinariness of Vilna than in its extraordinary poverty and the vulnerability of its residents. He exposes the growing cleavage between Vilna's middle-class intellectuals, who ran the community's institutions, and its mass of working poor.

Elsewhere, Levin turns his pen to explaining how individuals who might not normally involve themselves in politics develop a sense of class solidarity due to pressures beyond their control. For instance, 'Towards the Sun' offers a character study of a factory worker who falls ill because of a lack of fresh air. His doctor warns him that he will die if he does not take time off in the countryside. When he is invited to join a rally on the outskirts of the city, it proves a convenient opportunity for him to heed his doctor's advice. The collective spirit of Jewish and Polish workers puts him on the road to recuperation: 'Instead of coughing he sang of courage ... Between the lush fields and the sky, a resounding cry burst forth: To life! ... They gathered in a round valley full of late summer flowers and tall poplar trees. The sun was like a warm girlfriend, providing everyone with a taste of its rays through the branches and leaves ... Karpl put his head on the virgin grass. The warmth of new friends, his own people, enveloped him.'<sup>23</sup> Here, Levin offers a utopian alternative to the violent antagonism directed against Jews by extreme Polish nationalists that takes centre stage in his urban pogrom story 'Tsalel the Glazier'<sup>24</sup> (translated below). If 'Towards the Sun' provides a glimpse into the restorative possibilities of workers' solidarity when it manages to transcend religious and national differences, 'Tsalel the Glazier' draws the reader back into religious hatred and xenophobia.

The corrosive effect of exclusionary Polish nativism is a frequent theme in Levin's writing. All Yiddish writers in Vilna knew that fellow writer A. Vayter had been killed in Vilna by rioting Polish soldiers in April 1919 as Poland fought for its independence, and Levin and his colleagues pursued their creative work in an atmosphere marked by increasing anti-Jewish boycotts, hooliganism (the YIVO director Max Weinreich lost an eye when attacked on the street), and social exclusion, including at Polish universities. Polish right-wing parties, especially the Endecja, led by Roman Dmowski, opposed the emphasis placed on the primacy of the state (which included all citizens) over the Polish nation by the

22 'Friling in kelersthub', *Friling in kelersthub*, p. 40.

23 'Tsu der zun', *Yung Vilne*, 1935, No 2, p. 48.

24 'Tsalel der glezer', *Di tsukunft*, June 1937, p. 312–314.

Polish Republic's first leader, Jozef Pilsudski.<sup>25</sup> The traditional antipathy towards Jews as accomplices to deicide gave way to a new myth of Jews as Marxists, whose allegiances, especially among youth, lay with Moscow rather than Warsaw. The death of Pilsudski in May 1935 created a political vacuum that energised right-wing forces, whose ultimate goal was the removal of Jews from Poland. Anti-Jewish political rhetoric led to anti-Jewish action. Pickets formed outside stores, and a public campaign discouraged Poles from patronising Jewish stores. The *Endecja*, and later the more extreme National Radical Camp (ONR), also fought for the exclusion of Jews from Polish universities, the first step towards freeing the country of all minorities. Violence broke out at several Polish universities when they demanded that Jews be confined to separate 'ghetto benches', or expelled entirely. Several months after Levin's story appeared, in September 1937, the administration of Vilna's Stephen Bathory University in Vilna caved in to the threat of violence by local rabble-rousers, and refused to permit Jewish students to enter university property. Over 550 Jewish students took part in a hunger strike, and they were eventually re-admitted. But the rector continued to allow individual faculty members to decide whether to segregate the classroom. Jew-baiting reached its pinnacle in a wave of riots against Jews and their property. By August 1937, the Joint Distribution Committee had received reports of 350 anti-Jewish attacks in dozens of cities, towns and villages. As an indication of just how much the Jewish question consumed the Polish political landscape, on 19–21 May 1938, the Supreme Council of the Camp of National Unity (OZN) adopted its 'Thirteen Theses on the Jewish Question', which questioned the Jews' loyalty to Poland, contended that the Jewish role in the economy was detrimental to the average Polish citizen, proclaimed a desire to free Polish culture from Jewish influences, and argued that the ultimate solution to the Jewish problem would come only when Poland deliberately encouraged Jewish emigration. In Vilna, hooligans attacked Jewish property and pedestrians with little fear of the police.<sup>26</sup>

Levin portrays the psychic consequences of life under such conditions in several of his stories, including in 'Tsalel the Glazier', where we encounter the moral ambivalence of a worker who suffers from various layers of guilt: his inability

---

25 See Anna Landau-Czajka, 'The Ubiquitous Enemy: The Jew in the Political Thought of Radical Right-Wing Nationalists in Poland 1926–1939', *Polin*, No 4, Oxford: Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies, 1989, p. 169–203.

26 Melzer, p. 29–30, 75.

as a husband and father to provide for his family; his failure to rally fellow Jews to defend the neighbourhood when it comes under attack because they suspect his motives for wanting to rush to the scene of the violence; and his instinctive desire as a glazier to chase after business every time a Jewish storefront is shattered. As a poor Jew, he and his family are marginalised many times over: as a worker, he is betrayed by the indifference of Jewish property owners who neglect to provide for labourers; as a Jew, he is prey to anti-semitic scoundrels; and as a glazier he is humiliated by fellow Jews who claim he profits from attacks against them.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the bleakness of Levin's naturalist and psychological prose, his fiction reflected a strong commitment to Vilna as home. He was highly influenced by the politics of *doikayt* (literally 'hereness') that rejected solving the serious challenges confronting Polish Jewry elsewhere (as Zionism and Territorialism proposed). Yung Vilne had been nurtured by a generation of Yiddish intellectuals to serve as a manifestation of Yiddish culture *afn ort* (in situ), which emphasised collective dignity, local pride and cultural dynamism under the banner of Yiddish. Levin, a child of the city's Yiddish secular schools, was especially suspicious of those who looked to Palestine as a solution to Polish anti-semitism. Those who did emigrate to the Land of Israel were portrayed as traitors, as in Levin's story 'Shmulye's Household Runs Away'.<sup>28</sup> Shmulye's home had once been the heart of a Lithuanian shtetl in the Vilna province. When he and his family pick up and leave, their home is sold, disassembled panel by panel, and moved elsewhere by a local Pole. The gaping physical hole in the heart of the town where the house once stood is a painful symbol of decline and abandonment for Shmulye's brother Mende, who cannot reconcile himself to the betrayal. Mende's bitter internal monologue suggests that the Jewish life that Zionists sought to build elsewhere had immediate social and cultural consequences for those remaining behind:

---

27 Levin explores the theme of Polish-Jewish relations in other stories as well. For instance, the central character of 'Attorney Kronengold and his Son' is an amateur political thinker who authors the pamphlet 'New Europe', which calls for an end to all borders and animosities between peoples. By the end of the story, the threatening chants of right-wing Polish rabble-rousers shouting '*zhid*' (dirty Jew) teach him the limits of his own dreams of universal fellowship.

28 'Shmulyes shtub fort avek', in: *Almanakh fun yidishn literatn- un zhurnalstn-fareyn in Vilne*, Moyshe Shalit, ed., Vilna 1938, p. 112–121; reprinted in: *Di goldene keyt*, 1962, No 42, p. 134–141.

He tried to clarify matters for himself, but the more he thought, the more complicated matters became. 'The Land of Israel ... The Land of Israel. Naturally, it's our holy land, and Next Year in Jerusalem is our most heartfelt desire, but God in heaven! (he whispers only to himself) is it not a desecration that Shmulye's house is now in the hands of others! So much Jewish life is soaked into its walls: celebrations for those returning to Zion, weddings, circumcisions and bar mitzvahs ...

After pondering the alternatives, Mende concludes with determination:

'Shmulye's household might have abandoned us,' he smiled to himself resolutely, 'but my home is here, and here I will remain.'

Levin's sympathies lie with those who stubbornly resolve to assert their rights to Poland as home. The insertion into the story of a Polish greeting from a local passer-by serves to remind readers of the long history of neighbourliness between Poles and Jews that had been obscured by recent antipathies driving some Jews out.<sup>29</sup>

## A new audience

By the late 1930s, Moyshe Levin sought a counterbalance to the economic and political bleakness of his stories for adult readers. Banned from the classroom, he drew on his pedagogical training to turn his attention to children's literature, at the very moment when Polish Jewry seemed under threat both from within and without. Levin was drawn to the natural decency and innocence of children who were not yet fully socialised into adult animosities. Parents and Yiddish schools

---

29 That Levin's Yung Vilne colleague Avrom Sutzkever sought to rehabilitate Levin's reputation by reprinting this story in *Di goldene keyt*, the journal he founded in Tel Aviv funded by the Histadrut Zionist labour federation, is noteworthy given Levin's anti-Zionism. Sutzkever's editorial independence shows a commitment to using the journal to weave together various strands of prewar Yiddish literature, regardless of their political disposition, and his loyalty to his old friends in Yung Vilne and their ideals. It is also worth noting that when Levin became an editor at *Vilner emes* in 1940, the only Yiddish paper permitted to publish under Soviet rule in Vilnius, he published several of Sutzkever's poems when there was no alternative local outlet.

were always on the look-out for new texts that affirmed their humanist values. Between 1937 and 1939, he published around a dozen narratives in rhyme in short-book form. Those for younger children appeared under his pen-name Ber Sarin, and a number included his own colourful illustrations. At least half of his books for young children were self-published in Vilna under the imprint of the Children's Press (Farlag far kinder), and several also appeared simultaneously in Hebrew translation to support the Hebrew curriculum of the secular Yiddish schools run by the Central Yiddish School Organisation (TsYShO). Most of the characters in Levin's fiction for young audiences featured personified animals or plants, or young children interacting with the natural world; adults were conspicuously in the background, as were the concerns of his adult fiction. Levin's dedication to the development of children's literature during years of significant political anxiety suggests that he saw his work as a creative form of communal service designed to shield children from real-world pressures, and the child reader as the future consumer of Yiddish literature.<sup>30</sup>

During the same period, Warsaw's Kinderfraynd press published three Moyshe Levin stories for older children as independent volumes.<sup>31</sup> One of them, 'A Memorial by the River' (translated below), was based on an actual event that had captured the imagination of Vilna in April 1931. It provided an opportunity to model an alternative to the divisions between the city's religious and national communities by highlighting an example of shared civic identity and pride. Levin writes about a young Polish teenager who dove into the swollen flood waters of the Vilenke River to rescue a seven-year-old Jewish boy. Though his efforts ultimately were in vain, and both boys drowned, the incident swiftly became part of local lore, and a joint citizens' committee raised funds to erect a memorial (which still stands in contemporary Vilnius) to their common fate. The brave teenager's selfless actions and the monument to the boys' memory provided Jewish children

---

30 For an excellent review of Levin's work for children, including a bibliography and several images of his illustrations, see Shulamith Berger, 'Moyshe Levin (Ber Sarin) of Yung Vilne and His Solo Publishing Venture for Children', in: *Judaica Librarianship*, 2017, No 20, p. 100–133. A posthumous publication of his narrative poems for young children, along with his own illustrations, appeared as *Kh'vel aykh dertseyln a mayse* (I'm Going to Tell you a Story), Warsaw: Yidish bukh, 1958.

31 Moyshe Levin, *A denkmol baym taykhl*, No 16, Warsaw: Kinderfraynd, 1937. See also *Der vazon* (The Flowerpot), No 1, Warsaw: Kinderfraynd, 1938; *Di kats dertseylt* (The Cat's Tale), No 8, Warsaw: Kinderfraynd, 1938/1939.

with a vision for the unrealised possibilities of a multinational Vilna. Other stories for this older age group provided opportunities for Levin to directly address such concerns as homelessness, orphanhood and class stratification.<sup>32</sup>

### From Polish Vilna to occupied Vilnius and beyond

The success of 'Springtime in the Cellar' (1937) and Moyshe Levin's reputation as a prolific children's author prompted him to try his hand at more ambitious projects near the close of the decade. He began work on the novel 'The 1905 Revolution in Smorgon', and completed two dramas, one co-authored with his Yung Vilne colleague Shmerke Kaczerginski ('Azoy iz umetum' [The Same Thing Everywhere]), which was performed by Vilna's amateur Yiddish theatre, Davke.<sup>33</sup> By 1939, perhaps to relieve his mind of the headlines, Levin was hard at work on a series of science fiction stories about life in the third millennium, an excerpt of which was published as the fragment 'The Year 2939'.<sup>34</sup> Levin's fable fantasises about a world, precisely 1,000 years in the future, in which nation-states no longer exist, and in which technological progress has realised human immortality. Cemeteries have become such an anachronism that they are now tourist sites for schoolchildren to help them better understand the primitiveness of human life in the 20th century. However, the planet's one government now faces a crisis of overpopulation. As it ponders whether to institute a law banning all births, one deputy remarks, to the mockery of parliament, that in the past, population reduction was achieved through political events known as wars. Levin's story pokes fun at his own fears, written as it was when the possibility of a German invasion of Poland was a real possibility. Suddenly, the parliament's laughter is

---

32 For instance, see Levin's story *Di kats dertseylt* about a cat who feared that superstition against ginger-coloured cats might prompt her middle-class owners to separate her from her kittens and return her to wandering in Vilna's poorer neighbourhoods. Such a narrative allowed Levin to sympathise with children over how many of them existed on the precipice of food and shelter insecurity, and familiarise them with class divisions.

33 The manuscripts were never published, and they were lost in the war. For reference to these works, see *Literarishe bleter*, 26 February 1937; *Leksikon*, p. 289.

34 'Yor 2939', *Naye bleter*, Kaunas: A Group of Yiddish Writers in Lithuania and Yung Vilne, 1939, p. 13–16; reprinted in *Di goldene keyt*, 1980, No 102, p. 162–165.

punctured by an unexpected videogram sent from a Jewish state elsewhere in the galaxy that generously offers to take in Earth's excess population. That the Jews *still* exist on their own planet, separate from the rest of humanity, comes as an unexpected shock to the reader. After one thousand years of human progress, and in a world where borders between peoples have fallen, only the Jews still remain a nation apart. Levin's dystopian narrative can be read as an anti-Zionist jab, puncturing the belief that an independent Jewish state in Palestine would somehow 'normalise' the Jewish condition, or as a generally fatalistic determination that humanity would never fully integrate the Jews.

When Poland was divided between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Polish Wilno was conquered by the Red Army, turned over to Lithuania, and then reoccupied by the Soviets. Levin's prewar reputation led those at the newly formed *Vilner emes* (the only Yiddish newspaper permitted by the Soviet censor to publish) to conclude that he would be a valuable member of its editorial board. His prose of the preceding decade, most of which had concentrated on the city's poor, affirmed his political credentials. Levin's responsibilities at *Vilner emes* also meant that Yung Vilne would have one of their own looking out for their submissions. His standing was such that he served as a local delegate to the first meeting of Yiddish writers in the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic in Kaunas in May 1941. Levin's own publication in *Vilner emes* also suggests that he fell into stride with official Soviet ideology. In 'In a Red Army Truck' (1940), he describes the excitement felt by young boys of all nationalities when a Soviet convoy takes them on a drive around town. Yuzik, a Polish boy who had once tormented the Jewish children on his block, is terrified when he notices that Berke, one of the Jewish boys he used to abuse, is confidently sitting next to a Soviet soldier. 'The eyes of the two boys met for a moment. Berke's eyes were full of sweet pleasure, the joy that comes from the revenge of freedom. Yuzik's eyes were filled with the regret and sorrow that come from understanding that one has been found guilty.' Berke's revenge is sweet: he asks Yuzik whether any of 'his Polish soldiers' had ever taken him for a drive in their army truck? When the boy answers no, he invites Yuzik to jump in for a ride, so long as he agrees to scream out 'Long live the Red Army!' The story concludes with Berke accepting his former tormentor as a comrade.<sup>35</sup> Levin's

---

35 Moyshe Levin, 'In royt-armeyishn oyto (In a Red Army Truck)', *Vilner emes*, 30 September 1940, p. 3–4.

piece is remarkably enthusiastic about the promise of Soviet rule, considering that one of Yung Vilne's most steadfast supporters, the literary historian and *Vilner tog* editor Zalmen Reyzen, had been arrested by the Soviet authorities and disappeared when the Red Army first entered Vilna in 1939.<sup>36</sup>

When the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in late June 1941, Levin fled along with his wife and young daughter to Minsk, capital of Soviet Belorussia, where he thought they would be safe. It was not to be, and, far from home, he came to play a key role in the Minsk ghetto underground as one of its leading document forgers. According to Hersh Smolyar, a committed Jewish communist and resistance fighter who wrote a Yiddish memoir of the Minsk ghetto soon after its liquidation, Levin was among the first members of its underground, and its general staff convened in his ghetto apartment. When the Nazis forced Levin into slave labour as a painter at a local prison, he was eventually promoted to foreman of a labour brigade, providing him with access to information he shared with the underground. When he got word that the Germans planned a major culling operation in the ghetto in early March 1942 against those without essential work assignments, Levin took as many fellow Jews as possible from the ghetto to work with him at the prison. The prison chief, who knew of Levin's talents as an artist, warned him that he should leave them behind if he wished to avoid their fate. Drawing on his long-standing solidarity with workers that he learned at a young age in Vilna, Levin refused the opportunity that may have saved his life: 'If I leave, it will only be together with the workers!' He was shot alongside his comrades in the prison yard.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusions

Though Moyshe Levin was Yung Vilne's most productive prose writer, and an admired voice at local readings, because of his ability to provide an unvarnished,

---

36 Like many of his Yung Vilne colleagues, Levin had appeared with some regularity in the pages of *Vilner tog*, including non-fiction reviews published under the pseudonym Moyshe Vin. Zalmen Reyzen was shot by the retreating Soviets in 1941.

37 Hersh Smolyar, 'A vort tsu tate-mame un tsu zeyere kinderlekh (A World to Parents and to their Children)', in: Ber Sarin, *Kh'vel aykh dertseyln a mayse*, Warsaw: Yidish bukh, 1958, p. 3–8.

accessible portrait of life in Vilna, his achievements were largely eclipsed in Yiddish literary history by the Modernist experimentation of the group's leading poets, such as Leyzer Volf, Chaim Grade and Avrom Sutzkever. Nonetheless, if the name Yung Vilne suggested a synthesis of generational mood and specificity of place, Levin's fictional universe was intimately engaged with its realisation through the exploration of Vilna's contemporary anxieties, not as a gesture of despair, but rather as an aesthetic invitation to take full and honest measure of his place and time.

Received 2020 05 14

Accepted 2021 10 14

## Kasdienio gyvenimo proza: Moišės Levino Vilnos žmonių portretai

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama Moišės Levino (1907–1942) natūralistinė grožinė literatūra ir reportažai. Levinas – jidiš literatūrinės grupės *Yung Vilne* („Jaunasis Vilnius“), aktyviai veikusios XX a. ketvirtojo dešimtmečio jidiš kultūriniame gyvenime, narys. Šis straipsnis – tai akademinis tyrimas anglų kalba, skirtas Levino grožinei kūrybai. Prie jo pridėdami paties straipsnio autoriaus išversti trys Levino apsakymai (beje, anglų kalba jie pasirodo taip pat pirmą kartą). Straipsnyje siekiama įrodyti, kad Levinas savo grožinėje kūryboje nepasidavė Vilnos, kaip jidiš kalbos centro, mitologizavimui. Jis dėmesį sutelkė į reikšmingus ekonominius bei politinius iššūkius, kėlusius bendruomenei grėsmę tiek iš vidaus, tiek iš išorės. Keliama prielaida, kad Levinui, kilusiam iš stiklių šeimos, darbininkų kova buvo gerai pažįstama ir jis prijautė jai. Nors *Yung Vilne* grupėje prozos kūriniais buvo skiriama gerokai mažiau dėmesio negu poezijai, straipsnyje parodoma, kad prozininkai, ypač Levinas, rašydami socialinėmis temomis suteikė grupės veiklai svarumo. Levinui rūpėjo tokios temos, kaip žydų skurdas, nepagražintas žydų šeimos gyvenimas, jaunimo polinkis į komunizmą, lenkų nacionalizmo grėsmė ir sionizmo problemos. Straipsnyje pažymima, kad rašytojas buvo įgijęs mokytojo profesiją ir tai vėliau jį paskatino atkreipti dėmesį į vaikų literatūrą kaip į dar vieną su bendruomene suartinančią priemonę. Apibendrinant teigiama, kad sovietų ir nacių okupacija Vilniuje suteikė progą Levinui plačiai atskleisti savo politinius įsitikinimus.

*Raktažodžiai:* Moyshe Levin, Ber Sarin, jidiš grožinė literatūra, *Yung Vilne*.