KINGDOMS OF THE LITVAKS

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Cover images: from a private *pínkes* (record book), written in Hebrew and Yiddish by a wandering Lithuanian Jewish scholar, Isaac Jacob the son of Joshua, in the nineteenth century. For decades, the manuscript was the most treasured item in the personal library of Kalmen Kovl (Carl Cowl, 1900–1997), a proud Minnesota-born Litvak who lived in the Brooklyn Heights section of Brooklyn, New York. When he was ninety-one years old, Kovl published a study about certain astonishing aspects of the *pínkes*, in *Oksforder Yidish* II (*Oxford Yiddish II*, Harwood Academic Publishers: Chur 1991, pp. 199-214). Kalmen Kovl had acquired the *pínkes* from the American historian Wayne Cooper, and later bequeathed it to the author of *Seven Kingdoms of the Litvaks*. It forms part of the family library known as the Menke Katz Collection. *Reproduced by permission of the Menke Katz Collection (Carl Cowl Section)*

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INTRODUCTION

European Jewish civilization comprises an array of traditions and societies. They have all been among the STATELESS CULTURES of Europe. These are peoples who have never sought their "own" territory or sovereignty, and who have never wanted to have an army, a navy or a police force. They should not be confused with peoples who have lost their independence to another state and want it back, or with those who may aspire to sovereignty for the first time. Stateless cultures have nevertheless demonstrated viability over wide geographic areas, and durability over impressive stretches of time. Also, and not least, they have on occasion exhibited a proud propensity to sophisticated achievements in language, literature, the arts, folklore, systems of thought, and diverse contributions to the wider society at large.

Around a thousand years ago, The European period in Jewish history got underway with the rise of the Jewish culture regions. Each had its own Jewish name (often a playfully recycled biblical name), including ASHKENAZ in the Germanic lands; HOGOR (HAGAR) on Hungarian speaking land; KNAAN (KENAAN, CANAAN) in the Slavic region; SFORAD (SEFARAD; SEPHARAD in English usage) on the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal); TSORFAS (TSAREFAT) on French territory; YOVON (YAVAN) in Greece, TUGARMO (TOGARMA) in Turkey. The two primary "powerhouses of creativity" were Ashkenaz and Sepharad.

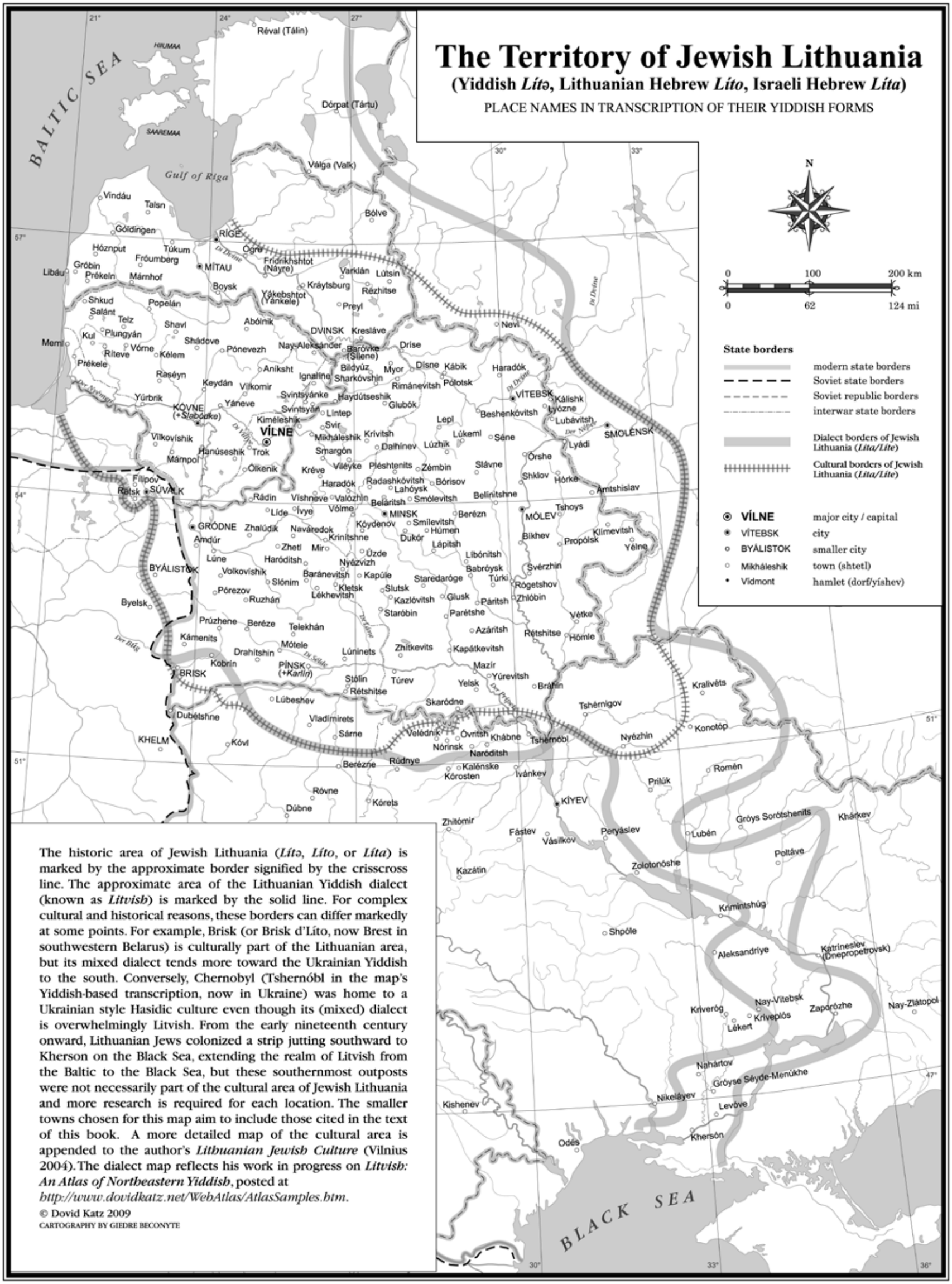
The Ashkenazim and the Sephardim (as the Jewish people of these cultural territories are known, via the plurals of Ashkenazi and Sephardi, each referring to a Jewish individual from the relevant area) were destined to supplant the rest. This was in part because of internal factors such as a more intricately developed and self-sustaining heritage that was tenaciously perpetuated, adequate population growth with compact residential patterning, and the tendency even within smaller, weaker peoples toward the "major" interior traditions. But it was also, even mostly, the result of Jewish national tragedies brought on by the intolerance of medieval Christian Europe. In addition to persecution, murder and systematized human degradation, there were large-scale expulsions, as well as voluntary flight from imminent danger.

The major calamity to afflict Sephardic Jewry was the Spanish (and Portuguese) Inquisition, which climaxed in the 1490s, resulting in the end of the elaborate Sephardic Jewish civilization on its own territory, leaving behind only the Marranos, or crypto-Jewish "New Christians." But

The Territory of Jewish Lithuania

(Yiddish *Lítə*, Lithuanian Hebrew *Líto*, Israeli Hebrew *Líta*)

PLACE NAMES IN TRANSCRIPTION OF THEIR YIDDISH FORMS



The historic area of Jewish Lithuania (*Lítə*, *Líto*, or *Líta*) is marked by the approximate border signified by the crisscross line. The approximate area of the Lithuanian Yiddish dialect (known as *Litvish*) is marked by the solid line. For complex cultural and historical reasons, these borders can differ markedly at some points. For example, Brisk (or Brisk d'Líto, now Brest in southwestern Belarus) is culturally part of the Lithuanian area, but its mixed dialect tends more toward the Ukrainian Yiddish to the south. Conversely, Chernobyl (Tshernóbl in the map's Yiddish-based transcription, now in Ukraine) was home to a Ukrainian style Hasidic culture even though its (mixed) dialect is overwhelmingly Litvish. From the early nineteenth century onward, Lithuanian Jews colonized a strip jutting southward to Kherson on the Black Sea, extending the realm of Litvish from the Baltic to the Black Sea, but these southernmost outposts were not necessarily part of the cultural area of Jewish Lithuania and more research is required for each location. The smaller towns chosen for this map aim to include those cited in the text of this book. A more detailed map of the cultural area is appended to the author's *Lithuanian Jewish Culture* (Vilnius 2004). The dialect map reflects his work in progress on *Litvish: An Atlas of Northeastern Yiddish*, posted at *http://www.dovidkatz.net/WebAtlas/AtlasSamples.htm*.

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CARTOGRAPHY BY GIEDRE BECONYTE

instead of it being the end of the road, relocated Sephardim went on to maintain and build upon their heritage in Greece, Turkey, Holland, North Africa and other diasporas. For the Ashkenazim, the catalogue of persecution stretched over centuries. The most famous "incidents" include the Crusades from 1096 onwards, the Rindfleisch massacres of 1298, violence surrounding the Black Death in 1348-49, and an assortment of expulsions from specific cities.

Ashkenazim escaped variously, southward to Italy and north to the Netherlands, but the recurring pattern, over centuries, entailed an ongoing eastbound trek to the Slavic and Baltic lands. The tolerance and generosity of a number of Polish kings and Lithuanian Grand Dukes is renowned in Jewish history. It was based both on rulers' straightforward wisdom (using the immigrants' skills, languages and contacts to grow the economy, irrespective of their religion), and on concepts of tolerance and pluralism that were astounding for their time. That tolerance, especially in the case of Lithuania, is most tellingly fathomed in the context of multitheism ("paganism") and the late and at-first-unrooted arrival of western Christianity.

The new Ashkenazic Jewish civilization that was crystallizing, around a thousand years ago, on the banks of the Rhine and the Danube, had three Jewish languages. Two of them, Hebrew and Aramaic, were sacred languages imported from the ancient Near East. Hebrew is the language of most of the Jewish Bible, the Mishnah (codified around 200 AD) and an ongoing body of legalistic, rabbinic and community literature. Aramaic is the language of most of the two Talmuds, the Jerusalem Talmud, completed around 400 AD, and the Babylonian Talmud, sealed around 500 AD. Although Ashkenazim had never spoken either Hebrew or Aramaic in their everyday life, they were far from dead languages. Texts in both were recited in prayer, studied intensively, read, and impressively, a steady stream of new works was written uninterruptedly in both. Aramaic was favored for the most culturally elite forms of literature: Talmudic commentary and Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). The universal spoken language of the Ashkenazim is the language that until modern times defined who an Ashkenazi is: Yiddish, a fusion language comprising an intricate interweaving of Germanic (mostly from select Middle High German city dialects) with the inherited Hebrew and Aramaic. And, from early on, a nascent Yiddish writing tradition was emerging for an expanding assortment of genres. All, in all, Ashkenaz was characterized by internal Jewish trilingualism (Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish), in addition to functional knowledge of local non-Jewish languages and dialects.

Ashkenazic life was largely founded on a literal reading of rabbinic law, itself consciously extrapolated, over millennia, by diverse methodologies from the received text of the Torah (the Five Books of Moses or Pentateuch). The accepted rabbinic standards attracted (and in traditional communities continue to attract) near-universal levels of acceptance. The religious laws impact numerous details of everyday life, of the ilk that modern secular culture would hardly think of as "religious" (ranging from — just as examples — the set blessing to be said upon seeing a rainbow to every detail of kosher dietary law).

In the traditional Ashkenazic belief system, it is as tangible as the sun and the moon that: God created the world in six days as per Genesis; chose Abraham and the people of Israel as His people; gave them the Torah (not just the Ten Commandments) at Sinai, whose laws (as interpreted by rabbinic authority) must forever be observed in full; will in the end of days send the true Messiah who shall descend from David, and will resurrect the dead. These two final beliefs, which can only be derived from the text of the Torah (or for that matter, the Old Testament) via creative exegesis, are every bit as firm as those explicitly stated in the Torah. Ashkenazic lore also reveres Jewish mysticism and its key works. In Ashkenazic society, it was the "class" of scholar-authors, and especially those whose own lifestyle exemplified goodness, humility and undoubting belief, who were the most prestigious people in town.

This, in short, was the Ashkenazic civilization which was "driven eastwards" by the Crusades and other persecutions, and which was reconstituted thanks to the environment provided by tolerant, multiculturalist kings of Poland and Grand Dukes of Lithuania.

The best-known Polish charter of privileges for Jewish subjects was issued by Boleslav (Bolesław) the Pious, duke of Kalish, in 1264, and extended to all of Poland by Casimir (Kazimierz) the Great in 1334. In Lithuania, there are traditions about a charter issued by Grand Duke Gediminas (Gedymin) that is in the realm of folklore, and relate to the years when he founded Vilna (Vilnius) in the early 1320s. The earliest actual preserved texts of Jewish charters are those of Vytautas (Witold), for Brisk (Brest) and Troki (Trakai), issued in 1388. They closely follow the Polish model. But in 1389, Vytautas broke bold new ground with his charter for the Jews of Grodna (now Hrodna, Belarus). It is a remarkable document of East European tolerance in the age of western intolerance, and a stunning testament to the achievement of Lithuanianness in the "Grand Duchy sense" of a confederation of peoples, cultures and religions (not to be confused with

the much later ethnocentric sense that rose in the spirit of modern nationalism).

In Eastern Europe, Yiddish acquired its Slavic component, which added to the preexisting richness of Germanic and Semitic language material. The Yiddish dialects imported by the Ashkenazim into Eastern Europe divide first of all into a southern ("Polish" or Poylish) group and a northern ("Lithuanian" or Litvish) group. Linguistically, it can be proven that these cannot derive from each other in the main; both go back to older origins in the west. The classic area of Litvish — where Jews spoke the Lithuanian dialect of Yiddish and used it in their pronunciation of Hebrew and Aramaic — corresponds in the main to various stages of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Later, in the nineteenth century, colonists took it all the way down to the Black Sea giving the linguistic area of Litvish a larger territory than the classical cultural area (see the map on pp. 8-9 for the approximate reaches).What is today the Republic of Lithuania is a sliver of the land known in Yiddish as Líte (pronounced LIT-eh, IPA [lítə]), in Ashkenazic Hebrew and Aramaic as Líto, and in modern Hebrew as Líta. Líte, Jewish Lithuania, comprises present day Belarus, Latvia and Lithuania along with chunks of northeastern Poland, northern and eastern Ukraine, and small bits of adjacent Russia.

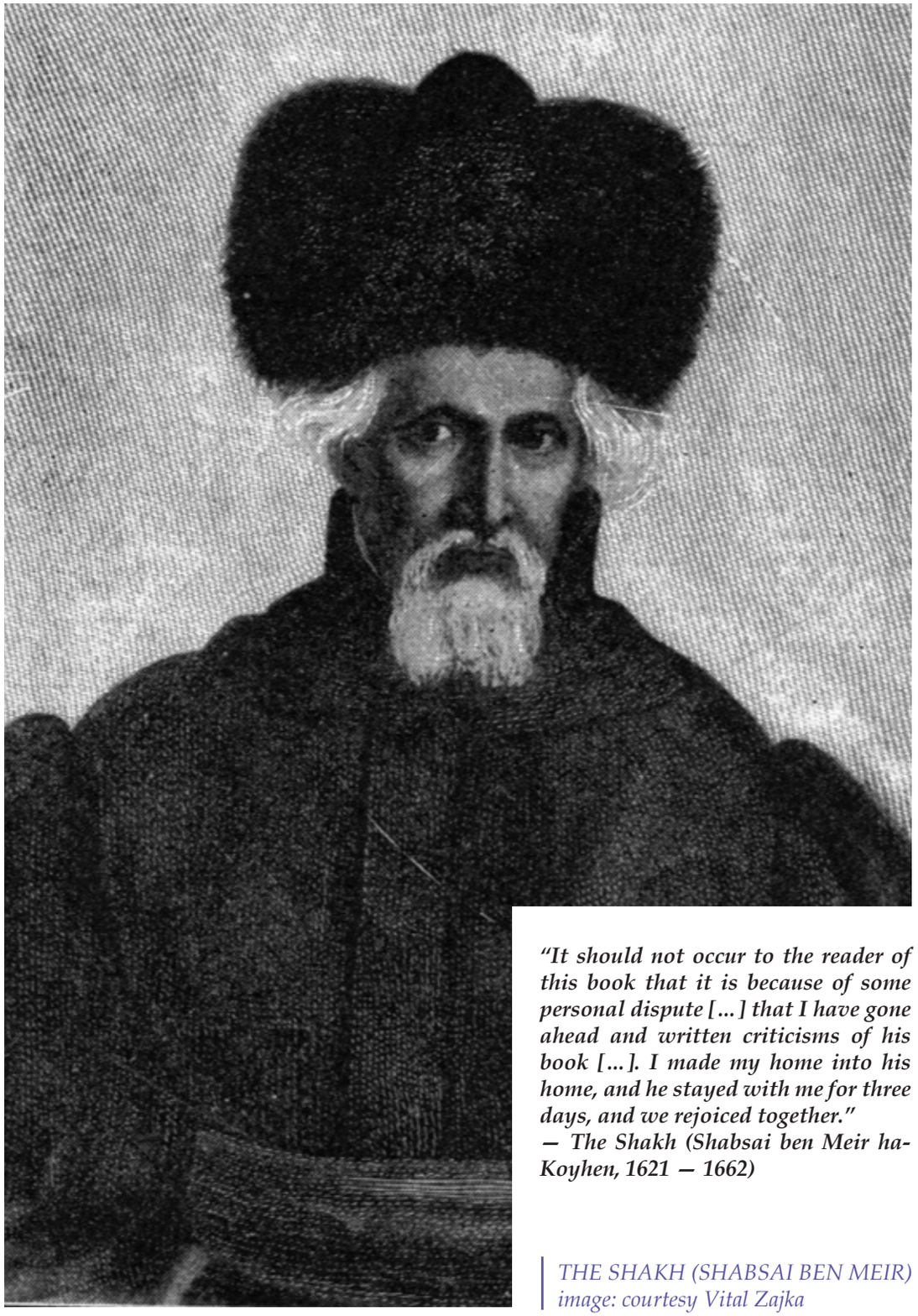
The term Litvak for a Lithuanian Jew is not nearly as old, and it has many nuances, but we may for expository purposes use it as a convenient and accepted shorthand for the concept of the Lithuanian Jew, projected backward in time, as is the custom with names of peoples. The Yiddish plural is *lítvakəs*, but we will here use the commonly anglicized Litvaks.

The lore of the Litvaks became closely intertwined with the city that became known as Yerusholáyim d'Líte, ("the Jerusalem of Lithuania"), or in some European languages, as Jerusalem of the North. Today's Vilnius is Vílne [vílnə] in Yiddish, Vílno in Ashkenazic Hebrew, and Vílna in modern Israeli Hebrew. It became the symbolic capital of Jewish Lithuania for hundreds of years and was, as appropriate for a symbolic cultural capital, situated more or less in the center of the native territory of Lithuanian Jewish civilization.

From 1519 until the 1760s, there was in Poland, Lithuania, and then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (after the 1569 Union of Lublin), a nationwide Jewish council, called the Vaad, which is considered to be a highpoint of Jewish autonomy in the two thousand year Jewish diaspora. It is popularly known as "Council of the Four Lands" after one of its stages. It is emblematic for Lithuanian Jewry that in 1623, the Lithuanian rabbis broke away from the council to form their separate Váad medínas Líto (Council of the State of Lithuania). The Litvaks wanted to go their own way. In 1623, the year that the Lithuanian Váad split off, it decreed that heads of yeshivas (Talmudic academies) must take in as many pupils as possible, including escapees from a plague in Poland. A 1639 law compelled yeshiva students to teach elementary age pupils for free. The passion for education was already a Litvak hallmark.

Vilna was to become the great Litvak city, but it was not the first. At first the three "principal cities" of Jewish Lithuania were Brisk, Grodna and Pinsk. In the early 1650s the drive to achieve this status for Vilna got underway, and it fully succeeded, after incremental stages, in 1687. In 1691, the last of the principal cities, Slutsk, was added. Excepting Vilna, these principal cities are all in today's Belarus.

So what did the Litvaks do in their Jewish Lithuania? They did many things. There is a complex and multifaceted history, but here, in honor of the Jerusalem Book Fair of 2009, we aim to concentrate on seven areas of Jewish life where Litvaks were leaders, shakers and movers, where they spearheaded trends of thought and became internationally known for doing so, giving Jewish Lithuania an exalted status in the annals of Jewish history. And that is the sense of the title of this little book: not the many pursuits of the Litvaks over the centuries; just seven of them where, within the context of East European Jewry, their pioneering work gave them a rarified aura of stateless royalty.



"It should not occur to the reader of this book that it is because of some personal dispute [...] that I have gone ahead and written criticisms of his book [...]. I made my home into his home, and he stayed with me for three days, and we rejoiced together."
— The Shakh (Shabsai ben Meir ha-Koyhen, 1621 — 1662)

THE SHAKH (SHABSAI BEN MEIR)
image: courtesy Vital Zajka

TORAH SCHOLARSHIP

Outsiders tend to think of "Torah studies" as "Jewish religious study" and in a sense that is correct. After all, these studies in traditional Jewish communities — to this day — are premised on absolute belief in the divine origin of the entire Torah (the Five Books of Moses), down to every last letter and dot of the received text. Moreover, such studies seek to elucidate permanent practical law from the Torah that is applicable until the end of time.

Nevertheless, there are vast stretches of rabbinic literature where the religious framework is just that: a framework into which a variety of disciplines are pressed, among them history, philology, logic, textual analysis and comparison, psychology, philosophy and more. If there is one overriding discipline covered in the Talmud and in subsequent rabbinic literature, it is, to use modern notions — jurisprudence. To continue with the modern conceptualization, "Torah study" is largely a study of intricate logical and legalistic principles and their application to specific situations. Sometimes the law is one that was never at issue in the practical life of Europe, for example the details of rebuilding the (third) temple in Jerusalem or the laws of the seventh-year sabbatical when the Holy Land must be left uncultivated. But other issues were as relevant to everyday life as the law of the land anywhere: how to determine the ownership of an object that two people claim to have found, or indeed, how to resolve disputes over property, money, divorce, contracts. In many times and places in postexilic Jewish history, the state would allow intracommunity disputes to be settled in a rabbinic rather than a civil court. But where there is conflict with local civil law, the rabbinic law is clearly expressed in the Aramaic dictum *díno d'malkhúso díno* ("The law of the state is the law!") which became a cornerstone of Jewish loyalty to the law of the host country.

The stateless Jewish society that developed in the diaspora came to admire above all else scholarship, whether mental acuity in mastering complex legal issues and interlocking points of an argument, or the compilation of original treatises that proposed novel ways of looking at old problems. The term "rabbi" can be misleading because moderns think of a congregational pastor whereas the great rabbis through the ages were in fact the top scholar-authors of their time and place. If we allow ourselves a terminological anachronism, but one that is accurate, they were the intellectuals of Jewish society, who also commented on issues of the day in the course of their writings. Many of these writings were in the genre of the commentary, comprising comments set out according to the content and structure of the text being commented upon, and in the fullness of time this led to commentaries upon commentaries and so forth. Another beloved genre is called responsa, or questions and answers. Sometimes they were "actual" questions sent in by people for reply, and sometimes they were a literary device based on questions in the air at the time, or questions that simply interested the author.

Lithuanian Jewry early on placed exceptionally high value on superiority in scholarship, far higher than on material wealth or other earthly attributes. In real life, for a number of generations, this motivated even poor communities to pool maximal resources to "import" an eminent scholar from a faraway land. At some point, critical mass is reached when the "imports" succeed in training local pupils, and homegrown series of scholarly families and "dynasties" get underway. Part of the process entails the establishment of various study groups and stable institutions, the best known of which are yeshivas. This first (and it turns out the last, see Epilogue) Litvak endeavor, to become the elite of Torah education of the Jewish world, was an extraordinary success.

For example, in 1572, Grodna, the primeval Jewish Lithuanian city (Vilna did not surpass it in stature until later), "brought over" Reb Mordkhe Yafe (Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe, ±1535 — 1612), a native of Prague who spent years in Poland and Italy. The synagogue where he laid a cornerstone still stands. During his decade and a half there, he helped establish what was becoming the "Lithuanian method" that stressed sharp, straight analysis of a problem via logical dissection and textual comparison rather than the *pílpul* or fanciful hair-splitting that is pleasurable but not often related to the original meaning (characteristic of Polish Talmudists of the period). In Jewish lore, he is known by the recurring word in the titles of his books, *Levúsh*, and to this day in yeshivas and traditional communities he is simply called in Yiddish *der Ləvúsh* (the Levúsh).

Another famous "import" was Joel Sirkes (1561 — 1640), known as the Bakh (*der Bakh*). This popular "rabinonym" derives from the acronymic from a famous commentary he wrote, called *Báyis khódosh* ("New House"). He was born and died in Polish cities, but lived for years in the region of Brisk D'Líte (Brest Litovsk, now Brest in Belarus). He taught and wrote there and in the nearby town Prúzhene (Pruzhán).

From the seventeenth century, and uninterruptedly until the Holocaust, Lithuanian born rabbis were among the most accomplished in scholarship and international prestige. One native was the Shakh (*der Shakh*), a name taken from the acronym of his book *Sífsey Kóyhen*. He was born in Amstibov, near Volkovíshik (Amscibava and Vaukavysk in Belarus today). His actual name was Shabsai ben Meir ha-Koyhen (Sabbethai ben Meir Hakohen, 1621 — 1662). For the purposes of the 2009 Jerusalem Book Fair, it may be opportune, instead of quoting one of his juridical accomplishments in Jewish law, to cite his comments about a rival scholar, the Taz (= Dovid ha-Leyvi of Ukraine, 1586 — 1667), with whom the Shakh had been engaged in heated exchanges (in their commentaries on the same code of law). It was in that connection that the Shakh penned his famous statement about robust debate not implying a lack of interpersonal respect. That dedication to robust debate became a classic component of the Litvak soul.

Another master Lithuanian commentator, whose work helped develop the science of razor-sharp textual comparison in a style of extreme brevity ("Litvak style") was Moyshe Rivkes, who was born in 1595 and grew up in Vilna. Perhaps he was the first famous Lithuanian rabbinic "export." After escaping the war of 1655 he reached Amsterdam where the local well-to-do Jewish community was awed by his scholarship. They commissioned him to proofread a new edition of the main code of law; he went much further however, and wrote his famous commentary upon it. Despite enjoying the good life in Amsterdam, he missed his Vilna, where he returned, and where he died in 1671. In his will, he left a bequest for descendants who might be gifted scholars. He wanted the income to go to help such progeny dedicate themselves to their studies without having to worry about money. One of those descendants, in the following century, was Elijah the Gaon of Vilna.

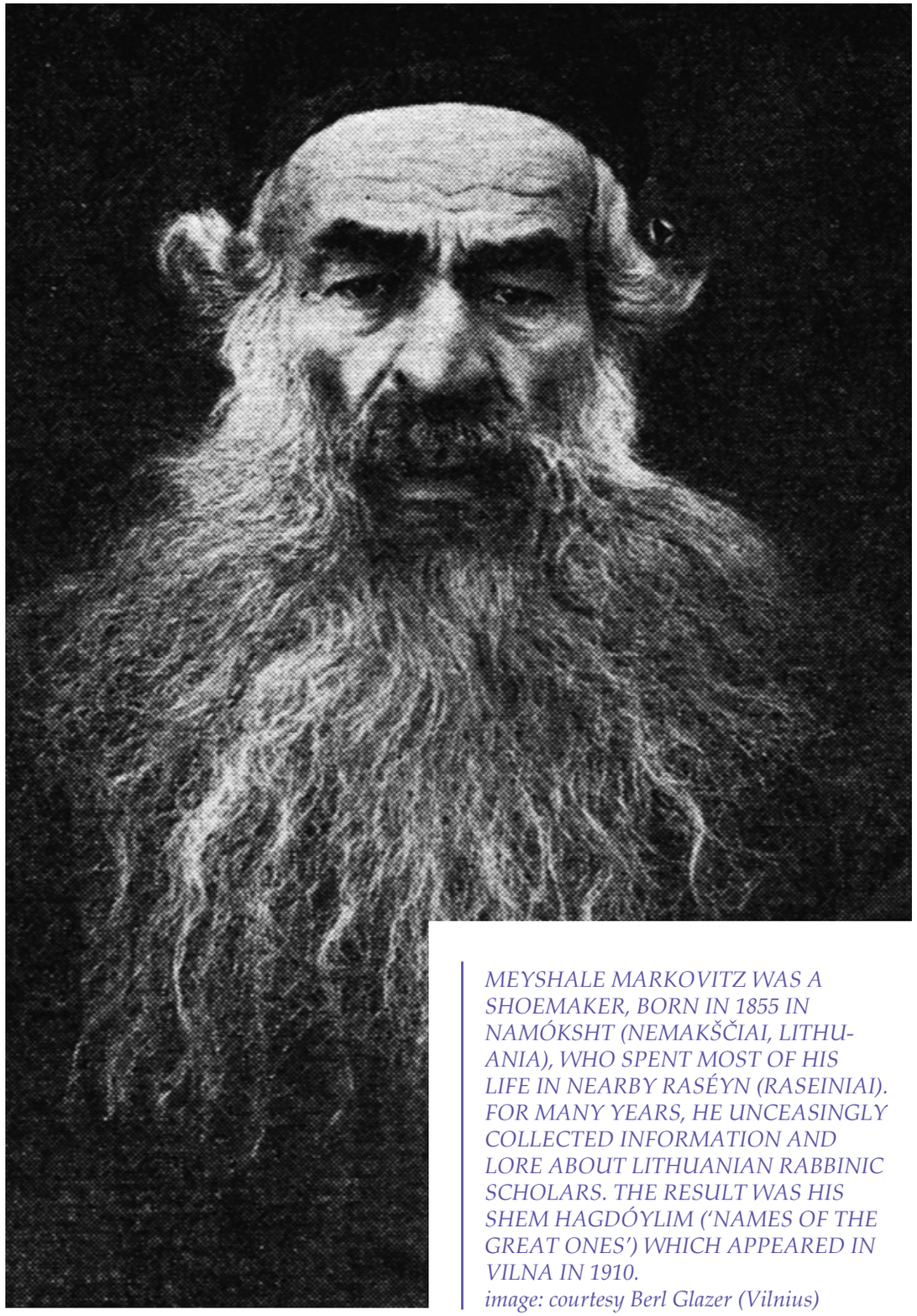
Born around 1720, Elijah (Eylióhu ben Shlóyme-Zálmen) in his youth acquired a reputation as a once-in-many-centuries intellect, and he went on to singlehandedly fashion for Vilna, already known by then as a bastion of Jewish learning, a reputation as its undisputed European center. His acu-

ity and phenomenal memory helped him correct textual errors in Talmudic literature that had led students astray for thousands of years. Whether in Bible, Talmud or Kabbalah, his works, many published after his lifetime, became classic. Even in his youth, much older rabbis from faraway lands would turn to him to resolve issues that they knew only he could fathom.

He took stands on the big-ticket Jewish issues of his time. Most famously, he led bitter battles against the Hasidic movement that included the famous Vilna edicts of excommunication. Ever since, the anti-Hasidic Litvaks have been known also as Misnágdim (literally "opponents" or "protestants"; mitnagedím in Israeli Hebrew). Rather less dramatically, he condemned modernizing changes in the spirit of the "Berlin Jewish Enlightenment" that was being led by Moses Mendelssohn in Germany. There is a certain irony that both movements were in some sense nevertheless enriched by him. The Gaon's sharp opposition to classic (southern, non-Litvak) Hasidism helped indirectly to shape the Chabad (northern, Litvak) Hasidism that he opposed most "personally" (see discussion below in §2). And, his own fascination with secular studies (he even wrote books on trigonometry, geography and astronomy) led in the end to Litvak receptiveness to modern culture, and to the emergence of a certain "subtype" of Litvak who is both traditional and wants to take part in secular studies too; who is, in short, in love with learning and knowledge, and "not so bothered" by the ongoing existence of ideological (and sometimes even theological) discrepancies as southern (Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, etc.) Jewish traditionalists. Nevertheless, Elijah the Gaon of Vilna was no "leader" in the common sense of the term. He stayed away from people and crowds and congregations, deeply worried about the time which any social contacts take

"The most important protection is solitude. Not to go out through the door of your house. And even in the prayerhouse, stay very briefly and then leave. And it's better to pray at home because in the prayerhouse it is impossible to avoid jealousy and having to listen to small talk and gossip."
— The Gaon of Vilna (Eylióhu ben Shlóyme-Zálmen, 1720 — 1797
from a letter to his wife, mother and other relatives)

THE GAON OF VILNA
image: Vilnius Yiddish Institute



MEYSHALE MARKOVITZ WAS A SHOEMAKER, BORN IN 1855 IN NAMÓKSHT (NEMAKŠČIAI, LITHUANIA), WHO SPENT MOST OF HIS LIFE IN NEARBY RASÉYN (RASEINIAI). FOR MANY YEARS, HE UNCEASINGLY COLLECTED INFORMATION AND LORE ABOUT LITHUANIAN RABBINIC SCHOLARS. THE RESULT WAS HIS SHEM HAGDÓYLIM ('NAMES OF THE GREAT ONES') WHICH APPEARED IN VILNA IN 1910.
image: courtesy Berl Glazer (Vilnius)

away from study and research during this short life on earth. For him, human-intelligence-based study and research of sacred writings are the highest religious pursuit. He frequently escaped to his hut in the forest to avoid being disturbed even by his immediate family. Among the anecdotal tales is his apology to his sister who came to town and wanted to see him after many years. He let her know that he sadly had no time, but no worries, they would have plenty of time to talk in the world to come. This motif fed into the growing image of the Litvak as rather aloof and cold, with an obsessive drive to get to the bottom of any factual quandary, over and above warmth and time for socializing.

The Gaon of Vilna taught only a small circle of elite scholars around his table, and never founded any yeshiva. But shortly after his death in 1797, his beloved pupil Chaim of Valózhin began work on setting up the first great, and highly structured, Lithuanian yeshiva in Valózhin (now in Belarus), in 1802. Like others to follow, it was based on the Gaon's methods and text choices, and it continues to be the model for "Lithuanian yeshivas" to this day.

THIRD-WAY HASIDISM

The Hasidic movement was founded in Podolia, Ukraine by Israel Baal Shem Tov (±1700 — 1760). He, and then his followers in the later eighteenth century, developed a revolutionary new Jewish movement that stressed joy and elation; a spirituality that everybody, not just scholars and rabbis, could partake in; ecstatic prayer as a higher endeavor than Talmudic scholarship; and perhaps above all, belief in the infallibility, sanctity, and direct divine links of the rebbe ([rɛ́bə]), replacing in some sense the "rabbinical degree of the conventional rabbi." Needless to say, all this was anathema to the Gaon of Vilna and Lithuanian Jewish scholarship in general. Worst of all in the Litvaks' eyes, the rebbe's "powers" were believed by the Hasidim to be passed on genetically to a chosen son, and could continue to be passed on indefinitely.

As opposed as the scholarly leadership of the Litvaks up north would have been to all this, it is unlikely that a big conflict would have broken out between two communities in faraway places. The Hasidic communities were down south in Ukraine and Poland. The Litvak centers, bastions of the Misnágdim, were up north in the Lithuanian lands. Big-time trouble started when the Hasidim began to make inroads into the territory of the Litvaks, first in Karlín (now a suburb of Pinsk, Belarus), in Amdúr (now Indura, near Grodna), encroaching northwards, and before very long, setting up two Hasidic prayerhouses in Vilna itself. That was already too much, and a series of edicts of excommunication were issued, starting in 1772. A major internal Jewish dispute was unleashed.

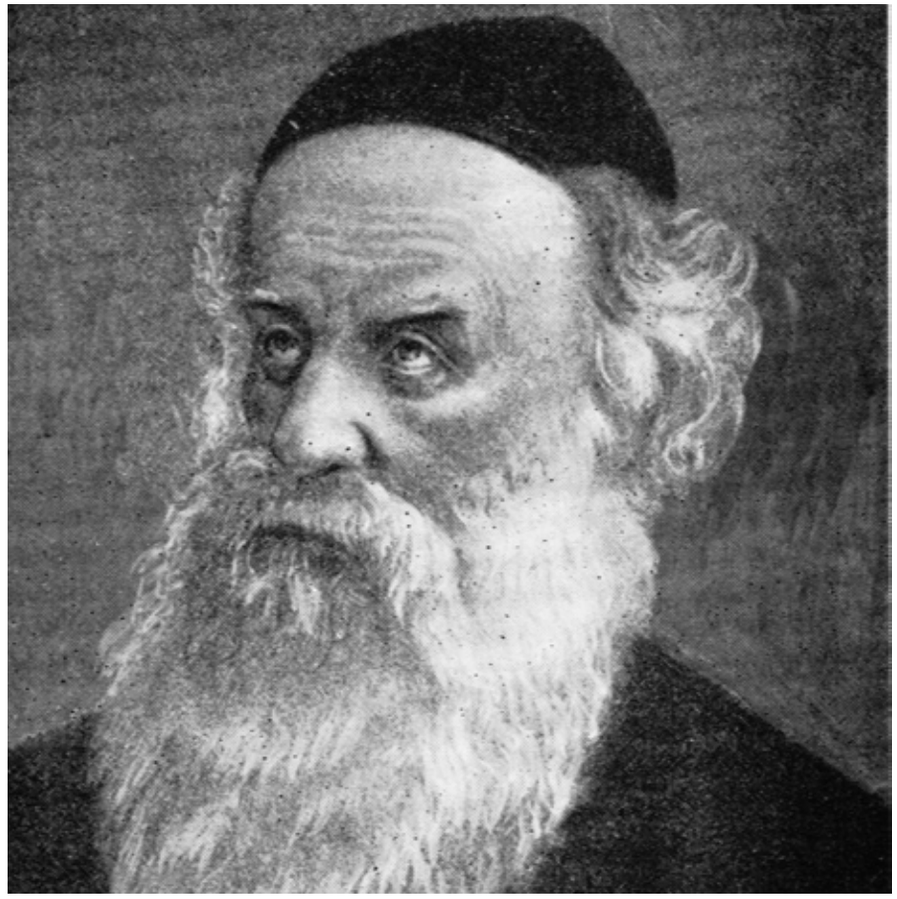
From that battle emerged a third entity: the leading branch of Lithuanian Hasidism, which was in life if not in name a Third Way movement. Perhaps that was (directly or indirectly) because its founder was a Litvak to start with. He built his new branch of northern (in other words, Lithuanian) Hasidism in the face of the fierce opposition from the Gaon of Vilna, the top Jewish scholar of his generation. He was Shneur Zalmen of Lyadi, a Litvak from the far northeast of Jewish Lithuania. He was born in Lyozna (near Vitebsk) in 1745, and was inspired to head down south to Ukraine to study with a Hasidic master there. Eventually he was sent back north to "spark the revolution" in his own environs, and truth be told he did so beyond all expectations. In those early Hasidic times, there were many accusations that the Hasidim practice drunkenness, sexual licentiousness, summersaults and shouts during prayer, and a generally carnival lifestyle.

Shneur-Zalmen spent much of his life battling these tendencies.

Shneur-Zalmen preserved basic tenets of Hasidism (including primacy of the rebbe) and even developed some of them into a more sophisticated theology, most famously the Hasidic version of pantheism in the sense of God-in-Everything. His famous treatise is the Tanya, a compendium of his thought. But through it all, Shneur-Zalmen insisted on the upholding of high levels of Talmudic studies in the classic Litvak spirit. In all sorts of other ways, most obviously dialect (of vernacular Yiddish as well as of sacred Hebrew and Aramaic), the Chabad Hasidim are closer to classic Misnagdic Litvaks than to the Hasidim down south. The Litvak-style dedication to study is symbologically evident from the very name of Shneur-Zalmen's movement: Chabad ([xabád]). It is an acronym of three ancient Kabbalistic attributes: *khókhmo* (wisdom), *bíno* (understanding) and *dáas* (knowledge). This trilogy emphasizes those "Litvak" aspirations, not the Hasidic ones. Via suffixation of the Yiddish (Slavic-derived) suffix —*nik*, an adherent of Chabad is called a Chabádnik (female: Chabádnitse). Later on, a less popular slang word developed to characterize the non-Lithuanian (vast majority of) Hasidism from down south: Chagas ([xagás]), an acronym of the three classical Hasidic qualities from the same ancient list of Kabbalistic realms: *khésed* (kindness), *gvúro* (strength) and *tiféres* (beauty).

Shneur-Zalmen had a daunting life. For decades he had to cope with the staunch efforts of his enemies. First there were those within his own Hasidic camp who intrigued against him relentlessly, over turf and authority, and over his opposition to the more frivolous brands of eighteenth century Hasidism that he so steadfastly combated. Then there were the Misnágdim who combated all Hasidim, and those in their own land with fervor. In the last years of the eighteenth century, Shneur-Zalmen was denounced twice to the czarist authorities on trumped-up charges and imprisoned in St. Petersburg. In his later years, he moved his court from Lyozna to Lyadi, and his name for history was fixed as: Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi (or, in Yiddish, Shnéyer-Zálmen Lyáder).

During Napoleon's invasion of 1812, Shneur-Zalmen came down on the side of the czar, in the spirit of traditional Jewish loyalty to the home country, but with an added Shneur-Zalmenesque twist. He wrote in a letter: "If Bonaparte wins, the wealth of Jewish people would multiply and their status be raised, but they will be separated and distanced from their Father in Heaven. If our lord Alexander wins, though poverty among Jews will grow and their status will be lower, they will be bound and tied in their hearts to their Father in Heaven [...] and for God's sake, throw this letter



"And it is good advice that is advised, to cleanse your heart of all sadness and any tinge of worry about everyday things, even about children, life and livelihood."
— Shneur-Zalmen of Lyadi (1745 — 1813) from his Likútey amórim ***(popularly:*** Tanya***), 26***

SHNEUR-ZALMEN OF LYADI
image: Chabad Lubavitch of Liverpool courtesy Rabbi Avremi Kievman

right into the fire!" The French army did not think his inclinations amusing, and he had to flee for his life. For five months, the aged founder of Chabad Hasidism fled from one place to another, succumbing to illness in the bitter cold in January 1813. He was laid to rest in a village called Haditsh (in Ukraine), where today Chabad and other Hasidim make pilgrimages from around the world. His son Dov-Ber moved the court again, this time to Lubavitch (now Lubavichy, Russia), and to this day this powerful branch of world Jewry, famed for outreach to estranged Jews everywhere is usually called just — Lubavitch.

THE MUSER YESHIVA (AND PRAYERHOUSE) IN KÉLEM (NOW KELMĖ)
image: Archive of the Center for the Lithuanian Cultural Heritage courtesy Akvilė Grigoravičiūtė

THE ETHICS MOVEMENT

By the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, the Hasidic-Misnagdic conflict within Jewish Lithuania had settled down, and enmity dissipated. The further east one went, the greater the concentrations of Lithuanian Hasidism, above all others Chabad-Lubavitch. Their center was in the "far east" in the regions of Vitebsk, Mohilov (Yiddish Mólev) and Gomel (Hómle). In the central regions, including Vilna, Minsk, Grodna, Brisk, there were Misnagdic majorities. In the west, say from Kovna (Kaunas) to the Baltic, it was pure Misnagdim-land.

The Misnágdim had their own holiest place names, including Vilna (Vílne) and Valózhin. Lithuanian Hasidim had theirs — Lubavitch and Lyadi in the case of Chabad, and for other northern Hasidic dynasties their own home courts, including Karlín, Stolin, and Slonim.

And it was in the far west, not far from the Baltic Sea, that a new Lithuanian Jewish movement arose. It was the Muser movement (Hebrew musar, often spelled Mussar in English). The town of origin (or association) of its originators was to become another of those "permanent geocultural concepts" in Jewish history that bring a catch in the throat when it is mentioned. It is Salánt (today Salantai), not far from the Baltic Sea. The two prime personalities in the movement are known not by their names, or book names or acronyms, but with the "natural" surname-sounding Sa-

"Our eyes see it: the many sins that people naturally restrain themselves from committing, and won't commit even when they are under some pressure. And then again, there are much worse sins that the same person will commit with ease. An example: a large part of our people, almost every single one, would not eat without washing their hands first, God forbid, even when they are hungry and upset. But they will very easily slander someone, a far graver offense, even when there isn't even any great passion driving it."
— Yisróel Salánter (Israel of Salánt, 1810 — 1883)

lánter (deriving, like so many Jewish surnames, from place name + -er).

There is a direct intellectual and folkloric line from the classic Lithuanian Jewish religious culture of the circles of the Gaon of Vilna through to the Muser movement. The Gaon's pupil Chaim of Valozhin (see above §1) had a pupil called Zundl of Salánt (Zundl Salánter; Yoysef-Zundl ben Benyomin-Beynish, 1786 — 1866). Zundl became a follower of medieval Hebrew ethics literature, striving to ethical behavior and humility, dressing like a peasant and living on a bare minimum. One day, standing in a pine forest, weeping before God in meditation, repeating a verse about the littleness of humans, he happened to encounter a fourteen-year old boy, Yisróel (Israel) of Salánt, and told the lad: "Study Muser!" and became the lad's teacher. That boy, Yisróel of Salánt (Israel Lipkin, 1810 — 1883) went on to become the founder of the Lithuanian Muser movement. During most of the 1840s he lived in Vilna, establishing a Muser-shtibl (Muser house, or room) in Zarétshe (today's Užupis), where people would come to meditate, often repeating with the very sad intonation of Muser study (it differs markedly from the Talmudic chant) a particular passage in a kind of meditation session that moderns sometimes liken to "group therapy."

A lot of Salánter's teaching taught that the Lithuanian Jewish glorification of Talmud was faulty if it did not go hand in hand with conscious efforts at self-improvement in the realm of ethics in everyday life. Just as a lot of effort was put into mastering a difficult section of Talmudic literature, a lot of effort must be put into working on one's character and faults, constantly and consciously seeking improvement.

In fact, when life demanded intervention, the Talmudist had no moral right to continue his study uninterrupted. One of Salánter's famous escapades during his Vilna years involved mobilizing a contingent of followers to help poor and sick people during an epidemic. Sensationally, he pasted up the city with notices that it is permissible to violate the holy Sabbath in order to save human life (itself an ancient Jewish law, but not "stressed" in such situations).

Under Salánter's influence, a number of nineteenth century Lithuanian yeshivas turned to Muser in varying degrees (often in conflict with traditionalists who opposed digression from the "straight" Talmudic curriculum). There were famous Muser yeshivas in Slabódke (now the Vilijampolė district of Kaunas), Kélem (Kelmė), Telz (Telšiai), and Grobin in Courland (now Grobina, Latvia).

Salánter eventually left Lithuania for Prussia (and briefly, Paris). The movement back home split. Some followed the founder's way, but a more extreme variant developed, associated with the town of Naváredok (now Navahradak or Novogrudok, Belarus). The Naváredker (literally "those from Naváredok") became the term for followers of this more extreme version of Muser (wherever they happened to be). They would set up "courage tests" that almost remind moderns of fraternity initiation tests: for example, asking for nails in a pharmacy or food in a clothing shop (to develop an indifference to the mockery of others). They also developed a reputation for becoming relentless pests to everyday people, especially those of means or with businesses, constantly reproaching them for alleged ethical lapses.

Still, the Naváredker branch of the movement, which petered out, should not cloud the mainstream Muser movement. During the middle years of the nineteenth century, Yisróel Salánter was not only developing his own Muser ideas, systems and their practical applications in life (ranging from sunset Muser sessions to actual new yeshivas — academies of Muser in effect). He was also modifying the mainstream Misnagdic culture of traditional religious Litvaks to include an ethicist component. To paraphrase it in perhaps more secular terms, a society that prized academic achievement as the highest pursuit came to modify that goal to academic achievement coupled with development of a strong internal critical faculty concerning one's own moral behavior and ethics in everyday life. Thanks to the Muser movement, the need to "work on oneself" throughout one's life became incorporated into the more formal religious and societal framework of Lithuanian Jewry.

And so, there were by the nineteenth century three kinds of Litvaks within the mold of traditional religious Jewish life. In the east, Chabad-Lubavitch stressed joy and being of good spirit. In the center, the classic anti-Hasidic Litvaks had maintained their ideal of Jewish learning as the highest pursuit. And, to the west, the Litvak soul rang with the sad chant of the Musernik.

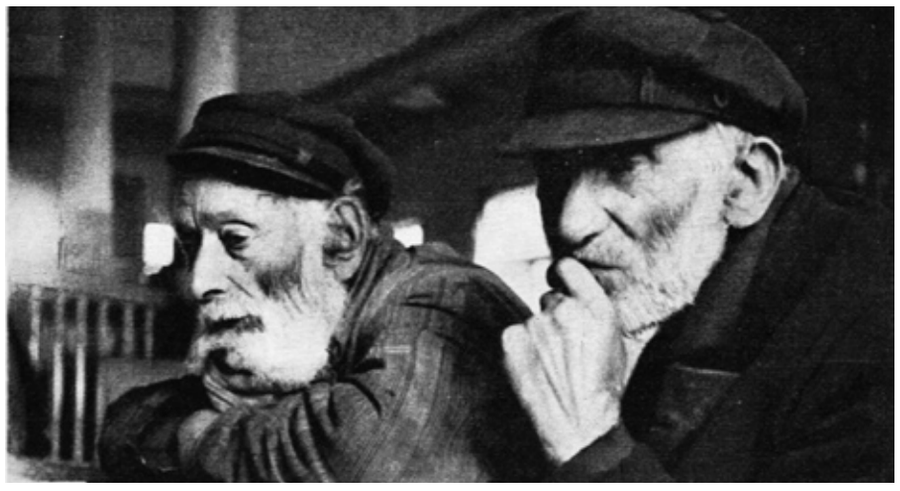
SCENES FROM THE LITHUANIAN SHTETL

SHAKING HANDS IN MICHÁLESHIK, A JEWISH SHTETL IN THE VILNA REGION (NOW MICHALISHKI, BELARUS)
image: courtesy Abrashke Rogovsky (Tel Aviv)

ELDERLY COUPLE IN SALÓK (NOW SALAKAS, LITHUANIA)
image: courtesy Ziske Shapiro (Podbrodz/Pabradė)

THE OLD WOODEN SYNAGOGUE IN ZHIDIK (NOW ŽIDIKAI)
image: courtesy Tomasz Wisniewski (Bialystok)

ICHILTSHIK BROTHERS TAILOR SHOP IN VÍLKOMIR (NOW UKMERGĖ, LITHUANIA)
image: Dov Levin, The Litvaks. A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania *(Jerusalem 2000), p. 135, courtesy Dov Levin (Jerusalem)*



LISTENING IN ON A TALMUDIC LECTURE: SHILEM THE BEADLE AND GERSHON THE BUTCHER, IN VÓRNE (NOW VARNIAI, LITHUANIA)
image: Dov Levin, The Litvaks. A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania *(Jerusalem 2000), p. 10, courtesy Dov Levin (Jerusalem)*

HEBREW REVIVED

The impressive participation of Lithuanian Jewry in the Zionist movement is often cited up to present times. Israel's current president, Shimon Peres, born in 1923 in Víshneve (now Višnava, Belarus, near Valózhin), is the last of a line of Litvak heads of the Jewish state. Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann (1874 — 1952) hailed from Mótele (now Motal, Belarus); its second, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (1884 — 1963) from Poltava (now Ukraine); the third, Zalman Shazar (1889 — 1974), from Mir (now Belarus). All three are in Litvak territory. Still, this little book is about "kingdoms" in the sense of pioneers, and modern (political) Zionism proper was of course founded by the Austro-Hungarian born Theodor Herzl (1860 — 1904), and its leaders came from many parts of Jewish Europe.

It was the new language and literature of the state-to-be that Litvaks pioneered. Theodor Herzl had envisaged a German-speaking Jewish state. That the ancient language of the prophets was transformed from a language of learning, reciting, praying, writing traditional texts to a modern spoken language — a feat still deemed unique in linguistic history — was principally the work of Litvaks. The Lithuanian Jewish societal emphasis on traditional Jewish learning had made way for the Jewish communities with the highest pro-rata knowledge and depth of knowledge of Hebrew in the world, in simple virtue of the fact that the studied texts were in Hebrew (or the related Aramaic, which was itself to be "mobilized" to further enrich a recreated modern Hebrew language).

There were two distinct phases: first literature, and then, near-miraculously — revived vernacular language.

The literary phase entailed the rise of truly contemporary-grade belles lettres, on the model of Russian, German, Polish and other European languages. The notion "contemporary literature" refers to both genre and readership. In the case of genres, some existed in Hebrew for thousands of years, like poetry, but it was the poetry of classic Jewish civilization and its offshoots. Classic Hebrew writing was, in content, usually far removed from the kinds of everyday here-and-now concerns that are on the collective mind of a modern community (though let us not forget that those "otherworldly" concerns are every bit as "real" for those within that culture). Other genres, like the short story, barely existed; one would have to stretch the definition to include hagiographic tales about wonder rabbis and miracles, or moralistic treatises where the moral about good — or God — win-

ning out is the centerpiece. Other major western genres, like the novel, for all intents and purposes, were not to be found at all (though traditional literature was rich in other, non-Western genres like the commentary and supra-commentary, responsa literature and more).

For Hebrew to become immediate, for Hebrew to become a potent force for discussion of the issues of the day, for Hebrew to become fun-for-many, for "everyday folks," not just the exalted tool of rabbinic scholars, there had to be, plain and simple, a made-to-measure modern urban environment. Modern Hebrew literature in the newer sense, which served inter alia as the stepping stone to the next, vernacular phase of the revival, was able to develop in the nineteenth century in the city that had already earned the title "Jerusalem of Lithuania" (Yerusholáyim d'Líte) for its rabbinic learning.

Vilna became in the earlier nineteenth century a center also of Jewish Haskalah (Yiddish: *haskóle*), the "Jewish (modernizing) Enlightenment" in its East European guise. Its adherents were called *maskílim* (sometimes translated "Enlightenment proponents"). Founded in Berlin by the German-Jewish circle of Moses Mendelssohn (1729 — 1786), its original version advocated jettisoning Jewish language, appearance and culture, in order to become "proper Germans" but with a distinct religion ("Germans of the Mosaic faith"). But in Eastern Europe, this rapidly evolved into a nearly infinite array of innovative syntheses between old and new. The difference was fundamental. Instead of just losing Jewish languages and so much of Jewish culture, the two primary Jewish languages, Hebrew and Yiddish, were rapidly remolded into modern European language-based cultures. In the fullness of time, each became identified with a distinct modern Jewish ideology — Hebrew with Zionism, and Yiddish with various forms of "hereism" which foresaw multicultural Eastern European societies where the Jewish minority would have cultural autonomy. This led to involvement with many forms of socialism, including anarchism, democratic socialism, and many revolutionary movements.

A number of maskilic (Haskalah-oriented) salons evolved in the home of some prestigious (and usually comfortable) Vilna families. These circles started producing new writing, reading it, enjoying and criticizing it, and supporting it (by paying authors, finding them work, and/or helping to publish their works). They sometimes also attracted talent from other places to come and settle in town.

Within a few decades there was a new Hebrew literature in Gedymin's city. A number of these Vilna literary salons have been well preserved in memoirs, lore and sometimes in literature itself. One of the best known was the home of Tsvi-Hirsh Klatshko (1790 — 1856) on Dáytshishe gas (now Vokiečių). The real force behind the project was his wife Toybe (Toba). Incidentally, it became a gathering place for Polish writers as well, and it makes an appearance in one of the novels of Polish romantic Józef Ignacy Kraszewski (1812 — 1887).

Another significant Hebrew literary salon was the home of the Katzenelenbogens. Tsvi-Hirsh Katzenelenbogen (1795 — 1868), known in town as Hirshl Simkhe's ("Hirshl son of Simkhe"), was both a functionary in the Jewish community, a scholar, and a successful merchant. His own poetry was weak, as is often the case with patrons of the arts, but he helped others. His most famous protégé was Avrom Dov-Ber Lebensohn (1794 — 1878), who was catapulted to fame at the age of nineteen when he translated (from Schiller's German version) Book 2 of Virgil's Aeneid. Lebensohn, incidentally, is known as Odom Hakóyhen (Israeli: Adám Hakohén) in Vilna. "Odom" is an acronym for Avrom Dov-Ber Mikhálishker (i.e. from Mikháleshik, a shtetl not far from Vilna, now Michalishki in Belarus, where he had lived for a few years).

Odom Hakóyhen became a poetic inspiration himself, first of all to his son, Micah Joseph Lebensohn whose short life was ended by consumption, and who is considered an even greater poet; his pen name was Mikhal, also an acronymic. He lived from 1828 to 1852. The older Lebensohn also inspired the most exceptional Vilna poet of the nineteenth century, Yehuda Leyb Gordon, a Vilna native, who is best known by his acronymic, Yalág. Gordon (1830 — 1892), produced radiant poetry that drew on his Vilna elders as well as on classics of European literature in other languages that he had studied. In other words, the Haskalah movement's push to study foreign language and literature was, in Eastern Europe, quickly resulting in potent cross-fertilization "back" to the Jewish languages that were being retooled on site, inspired also by rapid progress of the surrounding "smaller" non-Jewish languages.

An analogous development was taking place in modern Hebrew prose. Mordechai-Aaron Ginzburg (1795 — 1846) more or less "created" modern Hebrew prose, in part by breaking taboos of purism and enriching Hebrew from diverse sources, and in part by daring to coin neologisms for modern concepts (some are still in use in modern Israel). He was a native of Salánt (Salantai) who settled in Vilna in 1835. Together with poet Solomon Salkind he founded what some might consider to be the world's first modern Hebrew school in Vilna, in 1841. The first actual Hebrew novel was

ELIEZER BEN-YEHUDA WITH HIS FIRST WIFE DEBORAH YONAS (DEVORA BEN-YEHUDA), THE FIRST HEBREW SPEAKING MOTHER IN THOUSANDS OF YEARS.
image: Beit Ben-Yehuda International Meeting Center (Jerusalem)
courtesy Line Djamchid

"Just as Jews cannot be a truly living nation without a return to the land of their forefathers, so they cannot be a living nation without a return to the language of their forefathers, using it not just as a written language for religious and intellectual purposes [...], but expressly as a spoken language used by the common people as well as their leaders, by women and children, young men and girls, for all the purposes of life, at all hours of the day and night."
— Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (Eliezer Perlman, 1858 — 1922)

written by Abraham Mapu of Kovna (Kaunas, Yiddish Kóvne). It was called Ahavas Tsiyoyn ("Love of Zion"), a love story set in the days of the biblical King Hezekiah, in other words the 8th century BC. It first appeared in Vilna in 1853.

These are a few of the Litvaks who played a central role in the creation of a viable modern Hebrew literary language. They were able to bring to bear backgrounds in traditional Jewish studies of Torah and Talmud with Haskalah-spirited education in European languages and literature to forge the new European Hebrew that could quickly come to serious literature. (There were of course some non-Litvak writers and innovators too, but that is for another bookfair).

But writing is not speaking. Nobody in their right mind, even among the most dedicated Hebraists of the nineteenth century, thought too seriously about speaking Hebrew as an everyday language "all the time" rather than as a declamation, study session or some kind of stunt.

That modern Israeli Hebrew is today a thriving "real language" is mostly due to the stubbornness of one Litvak. He was Leyzer (Eliezer) Perlman, who was born in Lúzhik, not far from Pólotsk and Glubók, in the far

TEN OF THE LEADING EDUCATORS WHOSE ACHIEVEMENTS MADE VILNA AN INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE FROM THE TIME OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR, AND THROUGH THE ENTIRE INTERWAR PERIOD (UNTIL HEBREW STUDIES WERE BANNED BY THE SOVIETS IN 1940). A NUMBER OF THEM PERISHED IN THE HOLOCAUST.
image: J. Broydes, Zionist Vilna and its Activists *[in Hebrew], Association of Immigrants from Vilna and its Region in Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv 1939, p. 396b.*

northeast of Vilna province (today: Lužki, Polack, Hlybokaje, all in Belarus). He became Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858 — 1922), who made the revival of everyday spoken Hebrew his life's work. A lot of the effort was neither easy nor pretty. It entailed mustering (self-)hate against Yiddish and the native language patterns of all of his Jewish countrymen, and it entailed a degree of mental harshness toward his wife, Deborah Yonas, whom he compelled to speak only Hebrew once they arrived in Palestine in 1881. The experiment never succeeded outside the historic Land of Israel, in fact. Even today, genuine Hebrew speaking families in the diaspora are invariably émigrés from Israel.

Their son Ben-Zion became the first Hebrew speaking child in thousands of years (he later became known as Ithamar Ben-Avi, where "Avi" is an acronym for his father's name). In 1891, Deborah died of stress-related illness, and Ben-Yehuda quickly married her younger sister. The Hebrew-speaking-family project was not interrupted.

Whatever the costs, Ben-Yehuda was the classic "stubborn Litvak" who was determined to do the impossible and revive as a full-fledged vernacular a language that nobody had spoken for thousands of years. And he did.

But not alone! Surely it is appropriate for one myth to be corrected here on the occasion of the 2009 Jerusalem Book Fair, the 100th anniversary of Tel Aviv, and the 1000th anniversary of the first mention of Lithuania:

It is the simplest common sense that a language cannot be revived by talking to yourself. Nor can it be revived by two mature males showing off to each other their knowledge of the ancient Hebrew sources, even if they come up with novel variations on quotations. A language can only be revived by creating the first nuclear, truly-Hebrew-speaking-all-the-time family. And that takes a woman to be the equal. In the overwhelming majority of cases, she is the more-than-equal partner.

The ungloried co-reviver, and in the sense of mothering the first Hebrew speaking child of modernity, the primary de-facto reviver (albeit not the architect), was in fact Ben Yehuda's first wife, Deborah Yonas (often spelled Jonas; later formally Devora Ben-Yehuda). She too was born deep in Jewish Lithuania in 1855 in Drisa, a town to the north of her Ben-Yehuda's native Lúzhik, on the northern bank of the Dvina River. Drisa (Yiddish Dríse, now Vierchniadzvinsk in Belarus) is therefore the home town of the first Hebrew-speaking mother in thousands of years who paid with her health and her shortened years.

JEWISH SOCIALISM

Some historians trace the "tradition" of rebellion against the oppressiveness of the czarist Russian Empire to the Decembrist rebellions of 1825. Others take the 1860s as the time when radical intellectuals began to inspire exploited peasants to rise up. By the 1870s, a group of Jewish revolutionaries — virtually all Litvaks — were developing a Jewish revolutionary movement. The first leaders were from among the ranks of the *maskílim* (enlightenment proponents).

Aaron Liebermann (1845 — 1880), a native of Luna (Yiddish Lúne, now in Belarus, northwest of Pinsk) was a pupil in Vilna of the Hebrew poet Lebensohn (see §4). Later, during his studies in St. Petersburg he fell in with some Russian revolutionary types, and returned to Vilna, where in 1872 he joined "the other Aaron" (Aaron Zundelevich), and they led the first revolutionary socialist circle that was also profoundly involved with Jewish culture and languages. After being discovered by the authorities, he fled, and during his time in London set up the first Jewish socialist organization in 1876, using a lot of Hebrew in the process. A few years later , in 1880, together with the Lithuanian Yiddish poet, Morris Winchevsky (1856 — 1932), a native of Yáneve (now Jonava, Lithuania), he set up another society. Liebermann went off to America, where he committed suicide over a love affair.

But Liebermann's followers continued to build their new movement, which had to be wholly underground within the borders of the Russian Empire. One of the prime movers was Arkadi Kremer (1865 — 1935), a native of Svintsyán (now Švenčionys, Lithuania). Many of the 1890s leaders were heavily Russified, but Kramer's wife, "Pati" (originally Matle Srednitzky) encouraged more use of Yiddish.

In a series of secret meetings in the attic of a wooden house in Vilna, the Jewish Labor Bund was founded, on 8, 9, and 10 October 1897. The house, on Turemna (now Kražių Street, near Lukiškės prison) became the stuff of latter-day secular-revolutionary legend, in the city that had already boasted the crown of Jerusalem of Lithuania for its traditional scholarship. The clandestine meetings are said to have included thirteen delegates. Kremer was the animating personality. In March of 1898 three of the nine founders of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party were Bundists, and before long the Bund became the most vibrant Jewish socialist revolutionary movement, and the one destined to have the greatest cultural impact in

the non-Soviet parts of Eastern Europe right up to the Second World War.

It took the Bund a number of years to "find itself" both on the politically vital issue of violent vs. non-violent protest and on the essential Jewish cultural question of language and culture.

It was a single sensational act of (failed) violence that led it to abandon violence in favor of peaceful means of achieving change. On May Day 1902, the hated czarist governor of Vilna, Victor Von Wahl, ordered the arrest and brutalization of a group of Polish and Jewish demonstrators. Although the Bund per se didn't officially "decide" on an assassination of the governor, it was a group of Bundists who went ahead, following upon the Bundist call for revenge. A young bootmaker, Hirsh Lekert (1880 — 1902), a native of Hanúseshik (Onuškis, Lithuania), shot the hated Von Wahl, grazing his left hand and right foot. Young Hirsh was a bootmaker, not a marksman. Lekert was executed and became a folk hero, breaking sharply with the usual Jewish mode of hero: people of the pen and not the sword. There are numerous odes to the Bootmaker of Hanúseshik by twentieth century Yiddish poets. The Bund stuck to democratic socialism from then and ever after.

THE ATTIC ON TUREMNA (NOW KRAŽIŲ) WHERE THE BUND WAS BORN
image: Yivo Jewish Labor Bund Collection

Moreover, during the early years of the twentieth century, the Bund, having abandoned Hebrew and switched to Russian, was shifting toward a bold new position of explicit Yiddishism. Inspired by the new linguistic and cultural nationalism of the smaller oppressed nations in the Russian Empire, and by the enormous progress of Yiddish literature throughout the Pale of Settlement in the preceding decades, the Bund became dedicated to building up the everyday language of the millions of Jewish residents of the Pale to the status of a national language. Most of the rise of modern Yiddish literature had in fact occurred in Ukraine and Poland. One of the greatest inspirations to the Bund was the Polish Yiddish classic Y. L. Peretz (1852 — 1915).

But it was the Litvak Bundist leaders that pioneered the Bund's Yiddishism. By doing so, they transformed the Yiddishist movement into a force that had to be reckoned with, even by its enemies. They gave Yiddish what Yiddish would not have had, and without which Yiddish could not have risen as it did: the infrastructure of schools, publications, political parties and clubs, cultural institutions, youth movements and other institutions necessary for language and culture development at the European level.

In 1908, a maverick Jewish philosopher, Nathan Birnbaum, of the Austro-Hungarian empire, convened the Chernowitz Conference on Yiddish in Bukovina (today the city is Chernivtsy, Ukraine). The radical Yiddishist resolution at the conference was proposed by the Bund's firebrand Yiddishist, who was known simply by her nom de plume (and nom de guerre) "Esther." Esther (1880 — 1943) was born Malke Lifschitz, and married first to a Frumkin, then to a Vikhman; she is frequently referred to as Esther Frumkin. Esther's resolution at the conference was explosive. It

ESTHER, YIDDISHIST THEORETICIAN OF THE BUND
image: Giedrė Beconytė Collection

"Yiddish is the only national language of the Jewish people."
— Esther (Ester Frumkin [Malke Lifschitz]), 1880 — ±1943)

proclaimed that "this conference recognizes Yiddish to be the only national language of the Jewish people." The conference adopted the rather milder wording of Yiddish being *a* national language of the Jewish people, but the Hebrew-Yiddish "language war" was well underway in Jewish Eastern Europe, with Litvaks in the forefront of both sides.

Esther went on to write plans for new Yiddish school systems and their curriculum. Litvak Bundists went on to build what would become, after World War I, the empire of Yiddish in non-Soviet Eastern Europe, and above all in the interwar Polish Republic, which incorporated the great Litvak centers then known as Brest (Yiddish Brisk), Grodno (Gródne), Pinsk and Wilno (Vílne).

Boris Kletskin (1875 — 1937), a native of Haróditsh (now Haradzišča, Belarus), moved to Vilna where around 1910 he used his family fortune to set up an upmarket academic and literary publishing house in Yiddish. It became the famous Kletskin publishing house (for years it was a trademark of Kleyn Stéfn gas, today's Raugyklos Street in Vilnius). In addition to producing ever more scholarly and literary books and journals at the European high-cultural level, it published the world's leading Yiddish literary weekly in the interwar period, when it expanded operations to Warsaw. The weekly was called *Literárishe bléter*.

One young Bundist, Max Weinreich, was inspired to forget about the Bund's politics altogether and to devote his life to building the field of Yiddish Studies, bringing to Vilna yet another Litvak crown (§6), and later, in New York, writing the first major history of the Yiddish language.

YIDDISH SCHOLARSHIP

From the early sixteenth century onward, there were, mostly in central Europe, authors in a variety of disciplines who took a keen interest in the Yiddish language (known by a variety of names in earlier centuries). There were scholars who came to see it as an adjunct to Hebrew and Aramaic studies, or later on, as illuminating for Germanic studies. There were also more practical pursuits such as the compilation of handbooks and dictionaries for business people (learning to understand the competition), missionary work (learning the language of the target population), and anti-semitism (exposing the "secrets of the Jews"). Suffice it to say that none of these researches were undertaken in the spirit of helping to build a living, viable culture. They were products of the fascination of conceptual "outsiders" looking at Yiddish for this or that reason.

Modern Yiddish literature was growing dramatically around the turn of the twentieth century. It was "nearly all writers and almost no scholars," but eventually, a few bold researchers emerged, not necessarily from Lithuania. At the Chernowitz conference, for example, Matisyohu Mieses, a twenty-three year old from Pshemeshl, Galicia (now Przemyśl, Poland), delivered the first major scholarly paper about Yiddish in Yiddish. It was a tour de force, demonstrating how the smallest details of sound, meaning, usage and grammar were a reflection of unique culture that can only find authentic expression in the actual spoken language of the people.

The Litvak contribution involved the metamorphosis from scattered individual researchers to a challenge, in a sense, to "match Europe," or, more specifically, to learn from the rising smaller nations of Eastern Europe, for whom educational systems, a sense of literary and folkloristic history and identity, a standard language, orthography and grammar, and a single "most elegant" pronunciation all became symbologically potent building blocks of modern nationhood. And after all, Yiddishism had set out to build stateless nationhood.

In 1913, the first-ever collective volume of Yiddish scholarship appeared in Vilna, entirely in Yiddish. Edited by Sh. Niger (originally of Dukór, now in Belarus), the volume opened and closed with inspiring works by Ber Borokhov (1881 — 1917) which created the modern field of Yiddish philology. Borokhov (better known in fact as the founder of Labor Zionism), was born in Ukraine, in Zolotonoshi (Yiddish Zolotonóshe), but grew up in nearby Poltava, part of the Lithuanian Yiddish speaking territory.

IN THE WIDEST SENSE, THE MODERN YIDDISH CULTURE MOVEMENT ENCOMPASSED THE OBJECTIVE OF DEVELOPING ALL FACETS OF CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN LIFE. HERE, A SCENE FROM H. LASHKEVITSH'S BALLET STUDIO IN VILNA.
image: Leyzer Ran Collection, courtesy Professor Faye Ran

In his pioneering "The Aims of Yiddish Philology," which created the modern field of Yiddish in that 1913 Vilna anthology, Borokhov established the basic norms of modern Yiddish spelling; he declared "unilaterally" (and of course, controversially!) that "for the basis I take the pronunciation of the Vilna area." And so, in one stroke of a pen, the Yiddish of Vilna, the city that had earned the title "Jerusalem of Lithuania" for its rabbinic learning, also became the symbolic capital city of high-culture Yiddish, of — modern standard Yiddish.

In the same essay, Borokhov "dreamt" the rise of a Yiddish academic institute that would serve as the language academy of East European Jewry.

Borokhov died in 1917 at the age of thirty-six, his dreams unfulfilled. But as if in reply to his call, in the years around and after the First World War and the rise of the various national republics in the space of the fallen empire, Litvaks from all over the Lithuanian Jewish area — territories that had become Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the Belorussian SSR — settled in Vilna, which had just become Wilno in the Polish Republic, the city which Borokhov had audaciously proclaimed to be the Île de France, so to speak, of the stateless language of Yiddish.

Zalmen Reyzen (1887 — ±1940), a native of Kóydenov (now Dziaržynsk, Belarus), became the editor of the daily *Vilner Tog* (Vilna Day), and in the years 1926 to 1929 he published a four volume encyclopedia of modern Yiddish literature that contains biographies and bibliographies of around two thousand writers and is still a vital reference work for scholars of Yiddish literature. Even impassioned champions of Yiddish had not known the scope of the new literature in the vernacular language of East European Jewry.

Zelig-Hirsh Kalmanovitsh (1885 — 1944), a native of Goldingen (now Kūldiga, Latvia), helped build Yiddish education in a number of the newly-divided Litvak lands in the 1920s (including Lithuania, Latvia, and the Belorussian SSR) before settling in Vilna in the late 1920s. He became a leading pedagogue, editor, philologist and grammarian.

And then there was the prime mover, the most profound Yiddish scholar and best organizer: Max Weinreich (1894 — 1969), also a Goldingen native. He was among the first "professional Yiddish academics," having completed his doctorate on the history of Yiddish studies in Marburg, Germany, in 1923. He then moved to Vilna, where he married Regina Shabad, the daughter of the beloved Vilna "people's doctor," Tsemakh Shabad. In recent years, a sympathetic statue of Dr. Shabad, by Vilnius sculptor Ro-

mas Kvintas, has been erected in Vilnius (on Mėsinių Street).

The well-to-do Dr. Shabad helped provide some of the start-up funding for his son-in-law, Max Weinreich, to set up the Yivo in 1925. It immediately became the international academic center of Yiddish. Its first address was Great Pohulanka 14 (now Basanavičiaus 16), in the top-floor Weinreich apartment, and after moving a few houses uptown, it then relocated into purpose-built premises on Vivulski (Wiwulskiego) Street 18. "*Yivo*" is an acronym from the Yiddish name *Yídisher vísnshaftlekher institút* (Yiddish Scientific Institute). Within a few years, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein, both assimilated Jews in the German-Jewish mode, had joined *Yivo's* honorary board.

The high-flight academic volumes, in a new style of academic Yiddish masterminded mostly by Weinreich, Reyzen and Kalmanovitsh, started to flow from the Vilna Yivo as if it were a national university or research center. There were series on philology, history, economics, on various social sciences and a scholarly journal called *Yívo bléter*. A graduate research program was organized and students came from all over Eastern Europe. In 1938-1939, one, the future Lucy S. Dawidowicz, even came from the United States. And everything was conducted in the rarified standard that was based mostly on Lithuanian Yiddish.

When World War II broke out in September 1939, Max Weinreich was in Copenhagen preparing for a conference in Brussels. The conference was cancelled because of the outbreak of war. The paper Weinreich prepared was "A Tentative Scheme for the History of Yiddish." He never

THE YIVO BUILDING IN VILNA
image: Yivo

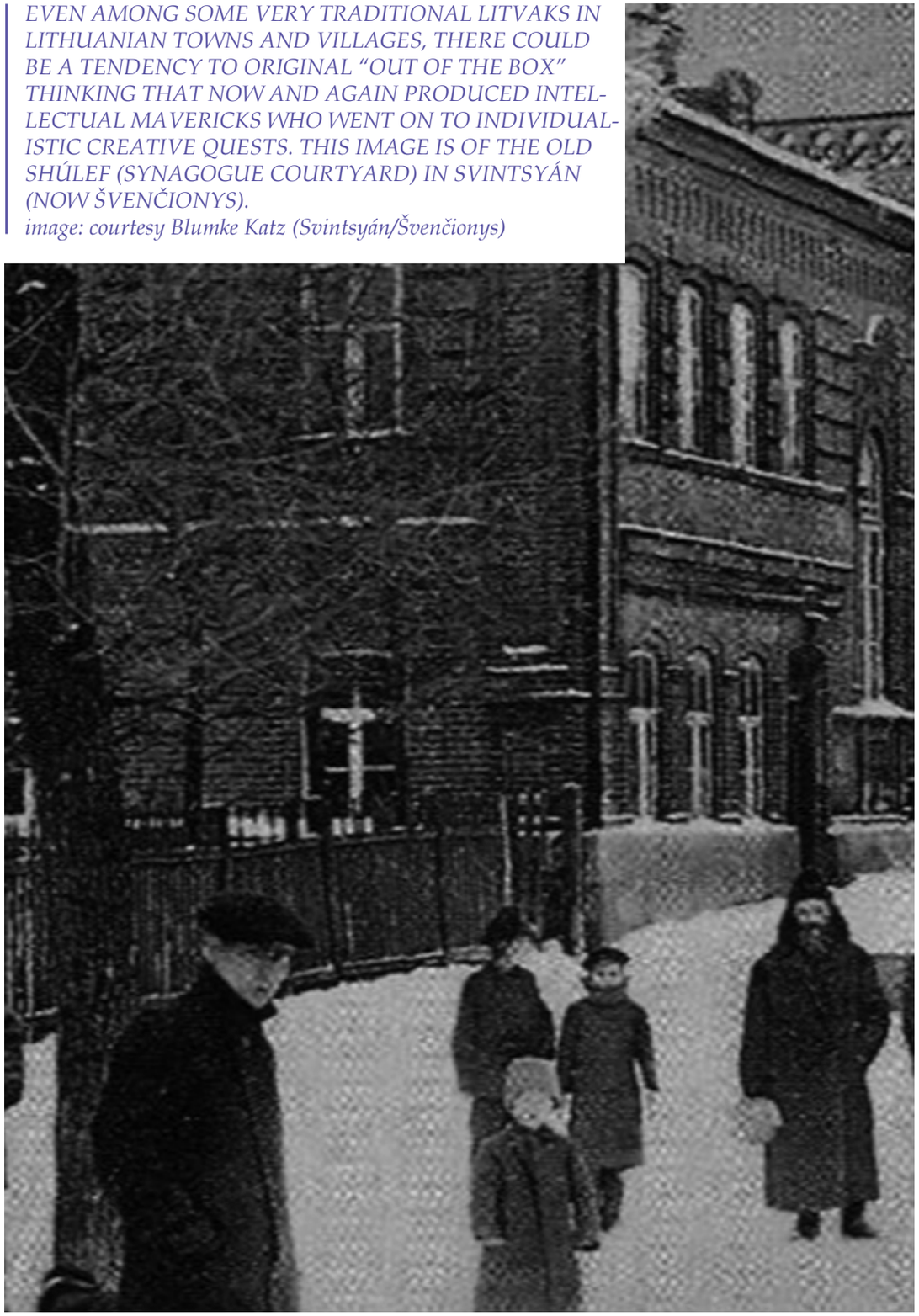
MAX WEINREICH IN VILNA
image: Yivo

"Of all the sciences, philology plays the greatest role in the national awakening of oppressed peoples. [...] The first thing for every awakening people is to become master of its own language. [...] The people has a mass of words in its witticisms, jokes, songs, stories, riddles, in all its folklore, which philology must research and cultivate. [...] But this is all a project that is not for individuals to take upon themselves. Individuals can develop individual branches, they can take the initiative, but only a societal institution can organize the philological work in all its breadth."

— Ber Borokhov (1881 — 1917)

returned to Vilna. He (and then his family) made it to New York, where the American branch of the Yivo became the new world headquarters. He spent the next thirty years immersing himself in the history of Yiddish. His four volume *History of the Yiddish Language* appeared, in Yiddish, posthumously, in 1973, and a full English translation just came out in 2008, thanks to Yivo, which remains the international academic center for Yiddish studies. Weinreich's older son, Uriel Weinreich (1926 — 1967) went on to establish the academic field of Yiddish in the United States, from which most of the world's Yiddish programs derive.

EVEN AMONG SOME VERY TRADITIONAL LITVAKS IN LITHUANIAN TOWNS AND VILLAGES, THERE COULD BE A TENDENCY TO ORIGINAL "OUT OF THE BOX" THINKING THAT NOW AND AGAIN PRODUCED INTELLECTUAL MAVERICKS WHO WENT ON TO INDIVIDUALISTIC CREATIVE QUESTS. THIS IMAGE IS OF THE OLD SHÚLEF (SYNAGOGUE COURTYARD) IN SVINTSYÁN (NOW ŠVENČIONYS).
image: courtesy Blumke Katz (Svintsyán/Švenčionys)



THE MAVERICK STREAK

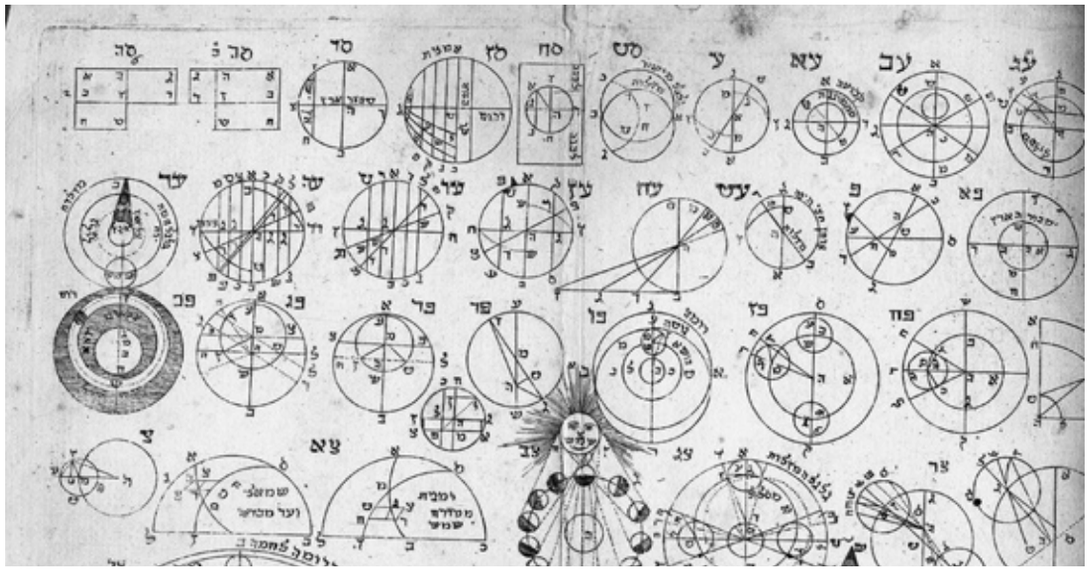
In Yiddish folklore, the Litvak has a "very special" reputation. He or she is more learned than others, immersed in books, and somewhat obsessed with finding out more and more about just anything. Moreover, the Litvak is supposed to be very stubborn, and determined to get to the bottom of things, and if possible, do anything to prove him or herself right. Litvaks also had a certain reputation for coldness, lack of emotion, lack of humor (except for the biting, satiric brand). In fact, the very word "Litvak" probably originated as an insult among non-Litvak (Polish and Ukrainian) East European Jews (the stressed suffix *ák* is almost always pejorative in the language, and later on, when it became an "okay word" the stress shifted to the first syllable). Last but not least, Litvaks were accused by other Jews of being less orthodox believers than others, harboring a place in their hearts for doubt, skepticism and intellectual exploration. Little surprise perhaps,

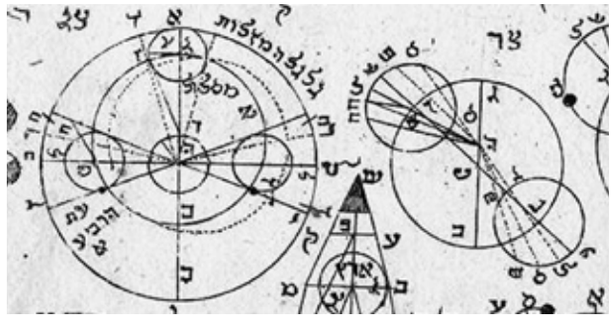
YOSHOR OF CRETE (DELMEDIGO)
image: courtesy Hermann Süss

that when the Jewish Enlightenment movement moved eastward, Vilna became its major center (§3).

Folklore is not meant to be "accurate" in any literal scientific sense, but tantalizingly, there is often "just something in it." For centuries, Jewish Lithuania has produced intellectual mavericks, both home-grown and foreigners who came to live in the country for some time, who went on to produce famous contributions "outside the usual box" of the traditional religious culture of Torah, Talmud, Kabbalah and the legalistic literature of commentaries and responsa. True to the folklore, none became gurus of new religious or ecstatic movements. They were in the realm of learning and of ideas.

One of the earliest intellectual mavericks in Jewish Lithuania was not even a Litvak. He was a philosopher-physician-astronomer-kabbalist: Joseph Solomon Delmedigo, a native of Crete, who lived from 1591 to 1655, and spent periods of his life in various cities, including Padua (where he studied with Galileo), Cairo, Constantinople, Amsterdam and — Vilna. In the early 1620s, when he lived in Vilna, he was welcomed as a weekly Sabbath "guest speaker" at the main city synagogue, and spent much of the week making medical rounds in the region. He became the private physician of Prince Radziwiłł. He also became a "debating partner" to a famous Karaite scholar in Troki (Yiddish Trok, now Trakai). The Karaites are a sect with a lot of Jewish roots and a religion based on the Old Testament but not the later Jewish rabbinic works. After leaving Vilna, Delmedigo (known to Lithuanian Jews by his traditional Jewish "literary name" — Yoshor mi-



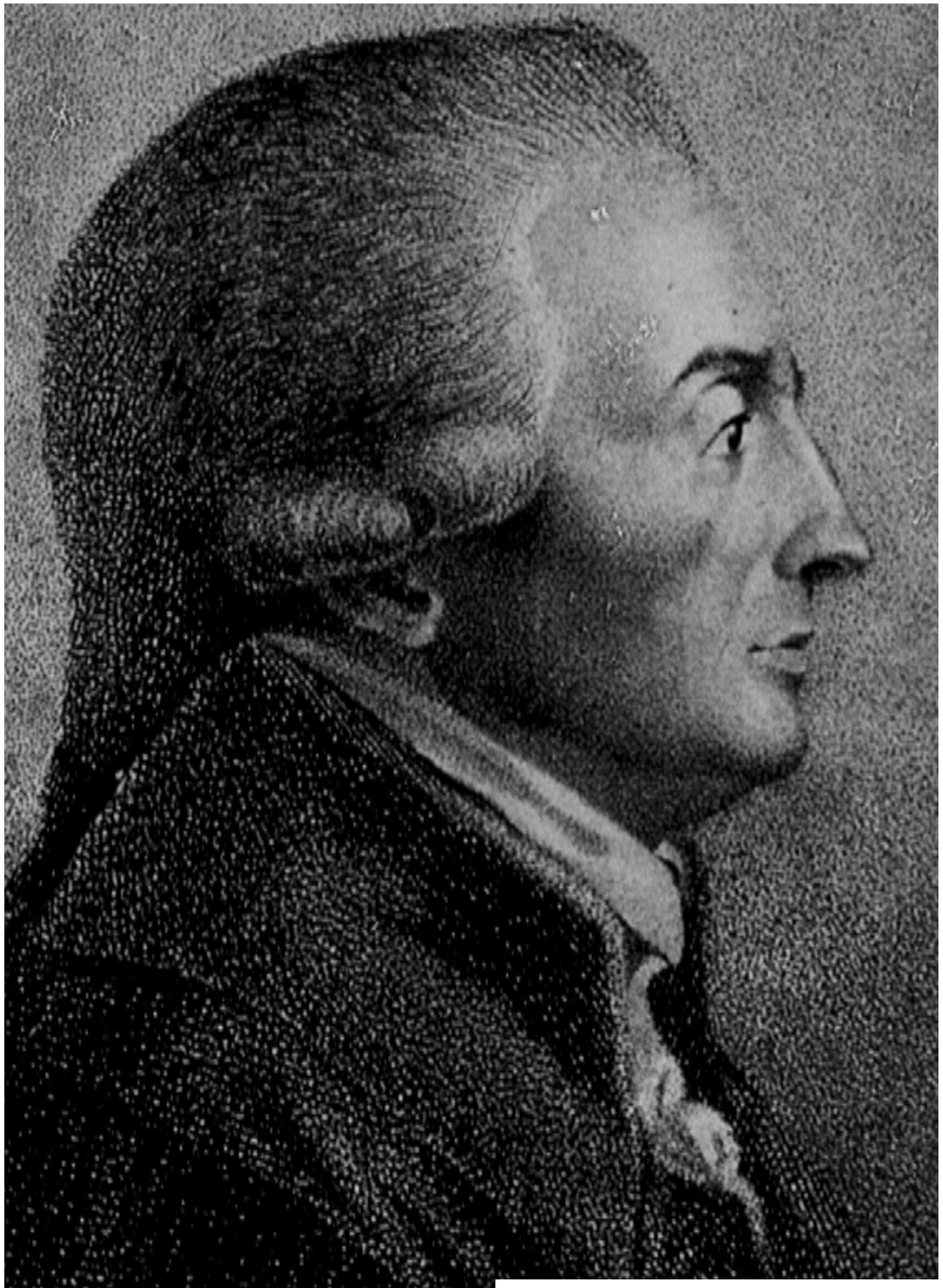


BORUKH OF SHKLOV: CHARTING THE UNIVERSE IN HEBREW IN 1777
image: Yivo Matisyohu Strashun Collection

Kandye = "Yoshor of Crete") wrote a fascinating book of replies to questions that the Karaite debater had posed to him. All in all, there were twelve major questions and seventy minor ones, covering a wide range of topics. The book of replies to the Karaite was published in Amsterdam in 1629 by Menashe ben Israel, who is best known in Jewish history for persuading Oliver Cromwell, in 1655, to readmit Jews to England.

For generations, the only "higher secular" career open to (and, it seems, of interest to) Lithuanian Jews was medicine. From the early sixteenth century onward, an appreciable number completed their studies in Padua, Italy, and then returned home to practice. They became known to locals as "The Paduans" (Yiddish *di Páduer*). Just as among gentiles, so among Jews, medicine in previous generations was a field thought of as encompassing philosophy and various other fields in addition to medical practice per se.

Judah ben Mordechai Hurvitz was an eighteenth century native of Vilna who studied in Padua, lived and practiced medicine in various Lithuanian towns and died in Grodna, in 1797 — the same year, it so happened, as the Gaon of Vilna (see §1 above). But unlike the Gaon who rejected all compromise with traditional orthodoxy, Hurvitz, who had spent time in Berlin with its Jewish enlightenment proponents, advocated a softer, gentler "Lithuanian" version of Jewish reform, that he expounded on in a 1764 book, comprising 365 sophisticated epigrams, all in Hebrew, with an emphasis on ethics. His most famous work, *Amudey Beys Yehudo* ("Pillars of the House of Judah") is a philosophical "trialogue," a debate between three parties, that appeared in 1766. The three protagonists represent the animalistic instincts, the feelings and the critical faculty.



SOLOMON MAIMON
image: courtesy Hermann Süss

What makes Hurvitz a unique thinker in the classic Lithuanian Jewish tradition is his rejection of a lot of both the secular west (which the Berlin Jewish enlighteners worshipped uncritically) and the rigid centralized Jewish community authority in the east. There are seeds of a more modernized ethical Judaism that consciously draws upon the best moral philosophy of the outside world. There is a visible impact of Rousseau, and Hurvitz enjoyed attacking Platonism and Aristotelianism with tinges of sharp Litvak humor. Hurvitz's life and writings deserve a fresh look.

Another complex scholar who synthesized traditional rabbinic learning with a love for the sciences was Borukh Shik (better known as Borukh Shklover, or Borukh of Shklov). His biography reflects movement through both the geography and cultural pluralism of a Jewish Lithuania in cultural flux. After being ordained as a rabbi, he served in Minsk, but yearned for secular knowledge too. So, he moved to London, studied medicine, and joined the Freemasons. Then he relocated to Berlin, where he befriended the Enlightenment modernizers, and published, in 1777, his edited edition of a fourteenth century Hebrew treatise on astronomy. In 1778, on his return trek eastward, he stopped for a time in Vilna where he befriended the Gaon of Vilna. He later claimed the Gaon's approval for the translation of scientific works into Hebrew. During his life, he wrote Hebrew works on anatomy, on medicine and hygiene, and translated a part of Euclid's geometry. He was among the first to translate a book from English into Hebrew. It was a work on geometry and trigonometry (1784).

One of the most colorful (and accomplished) Lithuanian Jewish mavericks was Solomon Maimon, the Lithuanian Jewish boy who grew up to become — a German philosopher. Born in 1754 near Nyézvizh (now Niaśviž, Belarus), he was a boy wonder at Talmud but quickly started searching through every book he could find, in any language. He was married off at a very young age, which set him off on a lifetime of romantic and sexual misadventures that became part of his persona as much as his academic brilliance.

His letters about philosophy, in Hebrew, profoundly impressed the founder of the Berlin Jewish Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn, who took the youth in to his inner circle in Berlin. But after various misadventures in personal life, he was sent on to the Hague, where he was taken in by a Jewish family, but thrown out after he refused to say the traditional blessing on wine, which he "regarded to be the outcome of an anthropomorphic system of theology." When he agreed to be baptized for practical-life reasons, the pastor refused because the philosopher explained he considered "the mys-

teries of Christianity to be what they are: allegorical representations of the truths that are most important to man."

His works in Hebrew include a commentary on the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides (after whom Maimon named himself), and works on algebra, mathematical physics and a commentary on a medieval commentator's commentary on parts of the Bible.

Maimon produced a lot of his best philosophical work in German during the final years of his short life (he died in his forties in 1800). They include a dictionary of philosophy, a new system of logic, a work on Aristotle, and his commentary on Immanuel Kant.

But among philosophers, Maimon is best remembered for a single line that is not his own, but Kant's: in a 1789 letter, Kant remarked that nobody understood his philosophy as well as this fellow Maimon.

In the Jewish world, Maimon is best known for his autobiography. It has appeared in Hebrew, Yiddish and several English translations. Besides being a one-of-its-kind "uncensored" view from close-up of Jewish Lithuanian life of the period, it is a window into the earliest days of the Hasidic movement. Not least, it is a fine literary work, written in what strikes the reader as a modernist voice, way ahead of its author's time. Far from portraying himself as any kind of hero, one sees a prototype of later Yiddish self-deprecating humor, especially in his hilarious romantic misadventures which are discussed uninhibitedly.

When we come to the modern period, from the late nineteenth century onward, say, the diversification of Jewish life and its many modern incarnations, including the secular pursuits of considerable parts of the population, makes individual great accomplishments interesting but not "maverick" as they were in earlier times. Various Litvaks became famous as writers (e.g. Asimov, Gary), artists (e.g. Chagall, Soutine), musicians (e.g. Heifetz, Godowsky), philosophers (e.g. Isaiah Berlin, Emmanuel Levinas), and more. In recent years, two concise encyclopedias of Litvaks have appeared in Vilnius in Lithuanian (see the entries in the bibliography for Lempertas and Liauška).

Perhaps the last of the true Litvak mavericks (like so many of the earlier ones, a medical doctor by training) was Ludwig Lejzer Zamenhof (1859 — 1917), the creator of Esperanto. In creating what he hoped would be the (or an) international language, he was yearning toward a better world of tolerance and increased understanding between peoples.

Born in Bialystok (solid Litvak territory, today in Poland), he published his *Lingvo Internacia* in 1887, translated many works of world literature, including the Old Testament, into his new language, and in effect founded the world movement that survives to this day, even if it has not fulfilled all its conceiver's hopes.

LUDWIG LEJZER ZAMENHOF
image: Esperanto Society North Wales

What is perhaps less well known to Esperantists and historians of the movement is that Zamenhof also did pioneering, and controversial work, in the field of Yiddish linguistics. In 1909, writing in the prestigious Vilna Yiddish journal, *Lebn un vísnshaft*, he published, under the pseudonym Dr. X, a detailed proposal for Yiddish spelling reform (principles that were by and large later accepted) and a radical proposal for Latinization of the Yiddish alphabet (that was not). Perhaps surprisingly for a professional linguist, Zamenhof in effect declared himself as a patriotic Litvak when he wrote, explaining the principles of his choices for standardization, "I have chosen the Lithuanian dialect, because it is more pure and more systematic." He went on: "I therefore propose a rule: to always write as the Lithuanian Jews pronounce it, except…" going on to cite a famous exception, where the Lithuanian *ey* for other dialects' *oy* is non-standard. He was a Litvak from top to bottom!

Zamenhof also wrote a Yiddish grammar, which was only published in 1982, and has still not been studied properly. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, where his tombstone, duly inscribed in Esperanto, is just a short distance from the mausoleum over the graves of three famous Yiddish writers, Y. L. Peretz, Sh. An-sky and Y. Dineson.

EPILOGUE

The story of the Litvaks has the saddest of endings.

On the eve of the Second World War there were about a million and a half Litvaks. They were spread over the historic territory of Jewish Lithuania (Líte, Líto, Líta), distributed among territories that were then part of (in alphabetical order) the Belorussian Soviet Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland (northeastern regions), Ukraine (northern and eastern regions); also some small areas of Russia bordering on the foregoing.

Over ninety percent perished. In Lithuania itself, the percentage murdered was alas the highest in Europe, in the mid-nineties; the absolute figure was around two hundred thousand, all unarmed innocent civilians. Two hundred and thirty-nine Jewish communities were destroyed in Lithuania, their people shot and buried in various of two-hundred-and-two known mass graves that are to be found in every region of the country. Historians attribute this to the extraordinary rate of voluntary collaboration by certain elements of the local population, constituting an infamous betrayal of neighbors. At the same time, it is important that blame not be apportioned beyond the actual guilty parties, and certainly not to later generations of any of the local residents. Moreover immeasurable credit is due to the hundreds of brave Christians who risked their and their families' lives to save a Jewish neighbor. Still, the need to deal straightforwardly with the actual history of willing collaboration and near-complete genocide has not yet been met, and even today, the Lithuanian Holocaust is frequently obfuscated by powerful state-supported institutions, via a lame series of inaccurate "equivalences between Nazi and Soviet crimes," a trend that in recent years has come to include unconscionable attempts to prosecutorally harass Holocaust survivors who are alive because they joined the anti-Nazi resistance. These heroes of the free world, themselves now among the last surviving prewar Litvaks, include Dr. Yitzhak Arad of Tel Aviv, Fania Yocheles Brantsovsky of Vilnius, Professor Sara Ginaite of Toronto, and Dr. Rachel Margolis of Rechovot and Vilnius. This and the sometimes perceived state toleration of antisemitism leads to frequent tensions between the state and the rapidly vanishing tribe of Litvaks. At the same time, a number of bold Lithuanians have stood out for their courage and integrity to confront the past head-on and have brought their country great credit. They include filmmaker Saulius Beržinis; Rūta Puišytė, assistant director of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute; Professor Liudas Truska of Vilnius Pedagogical Univer-

DR. SHIMON ALPEROVICH, CHAIRMAN OF TODAY'S JEWISH COMMUNITY OF LITHUANIA
image: Eltshik Chait

sity; Geoffrey Vasiliauskas of the Green House Holocaust Museum; Linas Vildžiūnas, director of the House of Memory; Rimantas Žirgulis, director of the Kėdainiai Museum, among others, including a number of outstanding teachers at the elementary and secondary level. One of the first intellectual trailblazers on the path to truth and reconciliation was the great Lithuanian writer, Tomas Venclova, now of Yale University in the United States.

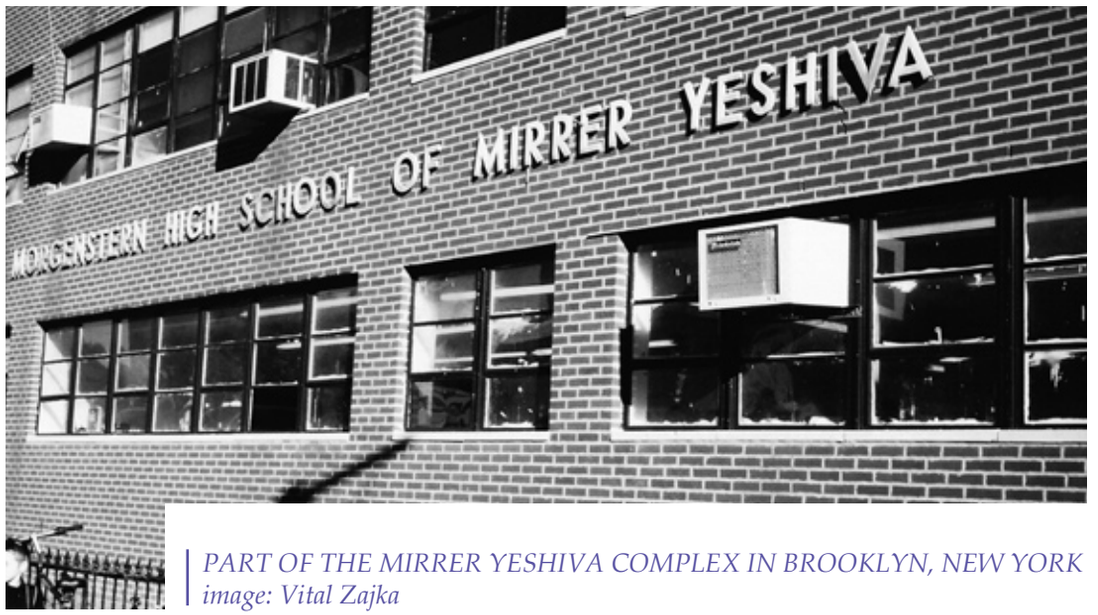
After the Holocaust, the repressive totalitarian Soviet regime prevented the survival of any of the forms of traditional or modernist Jewish life in Lithuania or any of the other countries in the Soviet Union or its sphere of power. Since the rise of freedom and democracy in independent Lithuania, the small community of surviving Litvaks has maintained its spirit and is lively out of all proportion to its modest (and shrinking) numbers. The community's vitality is enhanced by the dynamism, charisma and courage of its long-time chairman, Dr. Shimon Alperovich (Simonas Alperavičius), whose eightieth birthday was widely celebrated in 2008. The community receives generous support and many forms of vital communal guidance from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

There is little use in trying to pretend that Litvak culture has found its continuity in countries where there are substantial Jewish communities that hail from the Litvak areas of Europe. It has not. Most of Litvak culture was forever destroyed by the Holocaust. Nevertheless, there are some important survivals.

The Vilna-founded Yivo Institute for Jewish Research thrives in New York, thanks, historically speaking, to Max Weinreich's relocation to New York during the war (see above §6), and to the leadership of successive generations of leaders. Today's Yivo is the world's leading international research base for Yiddish studies, and one of the best for East European Jewish studies more generally, though most of its activity is conducted in English. In a wider sense, Yiddish language programs around the world at the academic level continue to be based on many of the standards of the Vilna Yiddish scholarship traditions, especially those of Yivo, and of Max and Uriel Weinreich. "Vilna as a concept" has retained its inspirational value in the field.

In the field of modern Yiddish literature, a number of famous Litvak writers continue to be read, studied and translated, including Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem-Yankev Abramovitsh, ±1836 — 1917), the "grandfather of modern Yiddish literature"; interwar master Moyshe Kulbak (1896 — ±1937), and such modern masters of Jewish Vilna as Chaim Grade (1910 — 1982), Avrom Karpinovitsh (1913 — 2004) and Avrom Sutzkever (born 1913).

In the sphere of traditional Talmudic studies, there are "Lithuanian yeshivas" in Israel, the United States and other countries that often bear the names of the towns whence they hail in "the old country." Among them are today's Mirrer Yeshiva in Brooklyn, hailing from the famous yeshiva in Mir (now Mir, Belarus); Pónevezh (or Pónevitsh) in Bnai Brak, Israel, continuing the yeshiva that once existed in that town (now Panevėžys, Lithuania). The yeshiva of Telz (now Telšiai, Lithuania) has its heir in the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, Ohio. In Israeli traditionalist religious ("ultraorthodox") circles, the "Lithuanian" wing of Orthodoxy split off from Agudas Yisroel (Agudath Israel) in 1988, and formed its own small party called Degel



PART OF THE MIRRER YESHIVA COMPLEX IN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
image: Vital Zajka

HaTorah which usually wins several seats in the Israeli Knesset. One of the strongest traditions is maintained by the network of Brisker institutions, which hail from the renowned Soloveitchik family from the region of Brisk D'Líte (Brest Litovsk, now Brest in Belarus). It has to be said that the Yiddish language, although maintained in some of these institutions (particularly Brisk and various communities in Jerusalem), is much weaker than in many Hasidic communities that originate in Poland, Hungary and Ukraine. In some settings, "Lithuanian" (Israeli *lita-í*) has become a common denominator type label for the sum of "ultraorthodox (Haredi) + Ashkenazic (non-Sephardic) + non-Hasidic" with not very much necessarily linked to the specific heritage of Jewish Lithuania.

It is an irony of history that the strongest religious movement deriving from the territory of historic Jewish Lithuania is Chabad-Lubavitch (§2). Under the leadership of its final two rebbes, Yosef-Yitschok Schneersohn (1880 —1950) and Menachem-Mendel Schneerson (1902 — 1994), it became an "outreach movement" that seeks to regain for religious Jewry Jewish people who are far from traditional practices and beliefs, and to provide them with user-friendly possibilities for reconnecting with religious practices. Chabad has an awesome international network of centers, schools, synagogues, yeshivas and other institutions. From the days of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chabad started sending usually young emissaries to build religious communities throughout Eastern Europe, including modern Vilnius, where its lively synagogue, on Šaltinių 12, led by Rabbi Sholom-Ber Krinsky, competes spiritedly with the official synagogue at Pylimo 39 (the old *Khór-shul*), which is often visited by the scholar of the Vilna Gaon's writings, Rabbi Samuel Jacob Feffer of Bnai Brak, and where official community rabbi Chaim Burshtein officiates.

In recent years many descendants of Litvaks from around the world have been taking an increased interest in their heritage, and since modern Lithuania achieved independence and became a most comfortable country to visit, many continue to make heritage pilgrimages each year. At the same time, a number of talented non-Jewish scholars in the historic homelands have been studying the language, literature and culture of a people that is no more.

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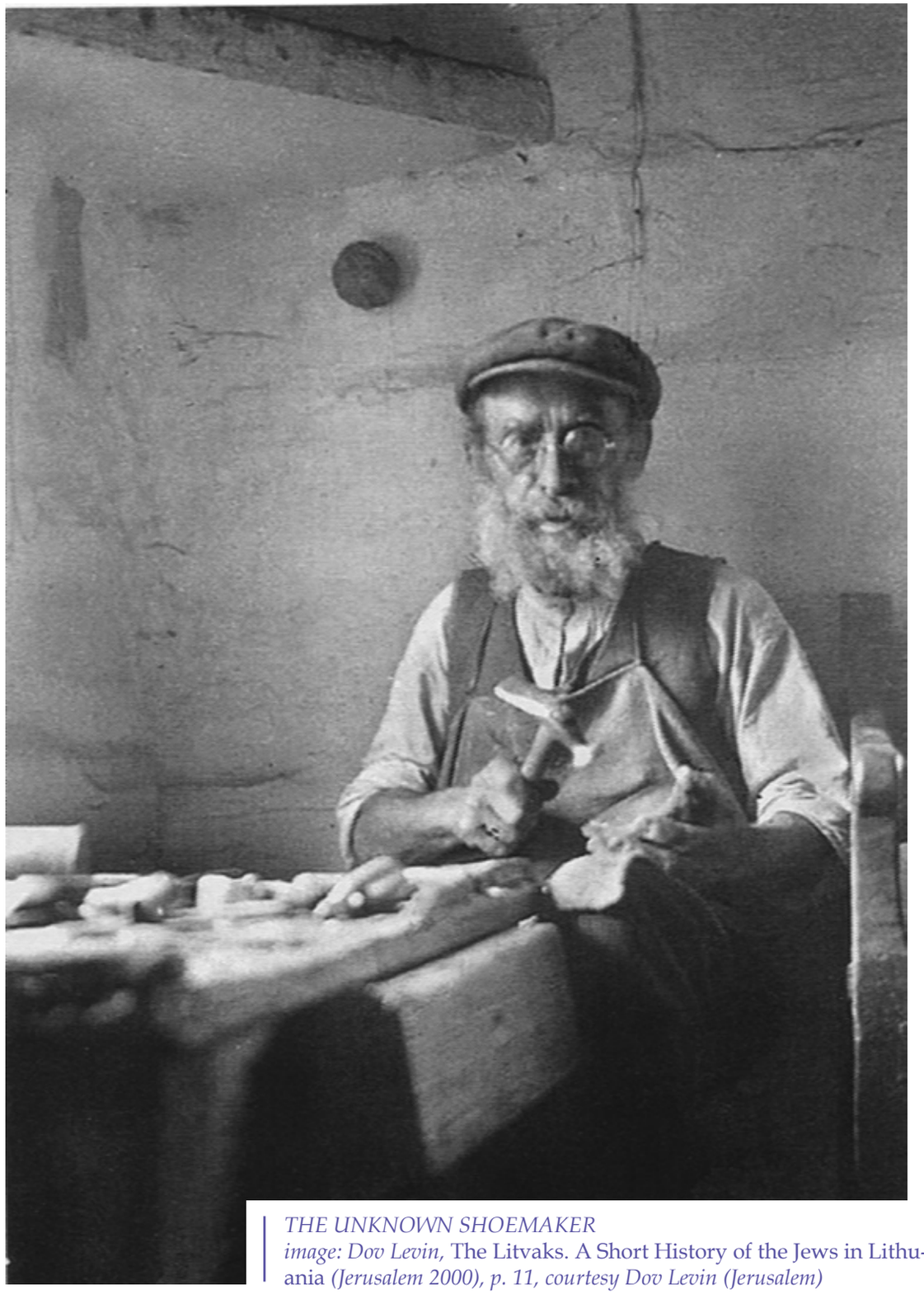

THE UNKNOWN SHOEMAKER
image: Dov Levin, The Litvaks. A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania *(Jerusalem 2000), p. 11, courtesy Dov Levin (Jerusalem)*