



Jewish Culture in the First Half of the 20th Century in Vilnius. Participant or Recluse?

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Abstract. This study attempts to find out whether during the first half of the 20th century in Vilnius Jewish culture was a separate cultural space or an integral part of the city's cultural scene. The research is based on analysis of documents and periodical press in Lithuanian, Yiddish, and Polish. The article evaluates two aspects of participation in cultural life: active participation (artists) and consuming (the public). Analysis of the periodical press and archival documents allows to claim that involvement of Jewish artists differed in different types of culture: Jewish artists and musicians were visible and valued by the non-Jewish public, whereas Yiddish theatre and literature were noticed very sporadically.

Keywords: *Jewish culture, interwar, Vilnius, national culture, Yiddish culture.*

Anotacija. Straipsnyje mėginama atsakyti į klausimą, ar XX a. pirmojoje pusėje Vilniaus žydų kultūra buvo uždara kultūrinė erdvė, ar integrali miesto kultūros dalis. Tyrimas atliktas analizuojant archyvinius dokumentus ir periodinę spaudą lietuvių, jidiš ir lenkų kalbomis. Straipsnyje vertinami du išitraukimo į kultūrą aspektai: aktyvus dalyvavimas (kūrėjai) ir vartojimas (publika). Periodinės spaudos ir dokumentų analizė leidžia teigti, kad žydų kūrėjų dalyvavimo miesto kultūroje matomumas skirtingose meno srityse skyrėsi: žydai dailininkai ir muzikai buvo matomi ir vertinami ne tik žydiškos publikos, o teatras ir literatūra jidiš kalba buvo pastebimi labai fragmentiškai.

Esminiai žodžiai: *žydų kultūra, tarpukaris, Vilnius, tautinė kultūra, jidiš kultūra.*

Introduction

Czesław Miłosz expressed an idea that at the beginning of the 20th century, Jewish Vilne, Polish Wilno and Lithuanian Vilnius – effectively three separate cities in the same place – turned their backs on each other.¹ He elaborated this idea to his fellow former Vilnius resident Tomas Venclova: “Vilnius was an important centre of Jewish culture, with traditions <...> While living in such a city I had to form an impression about all of this, but tradition was too big of an obstacle. Jewish and non-Jewish Vilnius lived apart.”²

This article attempts to answer the question whether during the first half of the 20th century Jewish culture in Vilnius was a separate cultural space or was it an integral part of the city’s cultural scene. As it was not possible to find personal accounts or diaries of interwar artists that would prove one of the two named possibilities, the research is based on analysis of periodical press and documents. This analysis will allow to look into the culture of Vilnius Jews and its contacts with Polish and Lithuanian culture. Research into contacts of Jewish artists and public with all the national minorities of the city is beyond the scope of this article, therefore two national groups were selected: Poles as national majority and Lithuanians as people who saw Vilnius as their historical capital.

The research focused on four types of secular art – classical music, literature, theatre, and art. Culture in both Yiddish and Hebrew was flourishing in Vilnius, but as it was one of the most important centres of Yiddish culture and language, this article will only overview the culture created in this language. The chronological boundaries of the research are approximately 1900–1939, as this period is often considered “the golden age” of Jewish culture in Vilnius. Jewish secular art began to develop at the junction of the 19th and 20th centuries, and this process was terminated during WWII.

Research into Lithuanian Jewish history has been increasing in the past two decades. It is worth noting that in the case of Vilnius, most of the research focuses on phenomena or events specific to Jewish history or culture, instead of trying to look into the situation without distinguishing or narrowing down to one particular ethnic group. An attempt to research the input of artists of different nationalities to certain events or phenomenon of Vilnius culture is made by both Lithuanian art historians³

¹ KARVELIS, Ugnė. Įvairiatautė Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės kultūra, 1252–1772. *Lietuvos žydai 1918–1940. Prarasto pasaulio aidas*. Ed. Yves Plasseraud and Henri Minceles Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2000, 58 p.

² Vilnius kaip dvasinio gyvenimo forma. *Metmenys*, Nr. 38, 1979, p. 24–25.

³ For example: LAUČKAITĖ, Laima. *Vilniaus dailė Didžiojo karo metais*. Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų institutas, 2018; KVIETKAUSKAS, Mindaugas. *Vilniaus literatūrų kontrapunktai. Ankstyvasis modernizmas/ 1904–1915*. Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2007.

and researchers outside of Lithuania,⁴ it also became topic of conferences and volumes of articles.⁵ This article will allow to research the situation from a historical perspective, to evaluate intercultural relationships in the field of secular art and to find out if there were any differences between reception of different types of art.

Drawing a line together or drawing a line between one another?

Jewish secular art was emerging around the same time as secular Jewish national identity. Naturally, the question was raised whether distinctive Jewish secular art exists, and if it does, what kind of art could be defined as Jewish? Is it something created by a Jewish person? Or is the artists' nationality not enough, and the piece of art must have Jewish symbols and people in it? During the interwar period Marc Chagall was the most vocal in raising the question of Jewish art in Vilnius. Although he never lived in the city, he attempted to start this discussion on more than one occasion. In 1935 Chagall took part in the YIVO (*Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut*) conference to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the institute, and used this opportunity to speak about the issue of Jewish art. Chagall noted that the Jewish nation does not have a clear authority which could unite the aesthetic taste of Jewish artists, and there are no leaders who would organize artistic life. The painter suggested that writers should join forces with other forms of art; in his opinion this step would give freshness to culture. He also suggested that YIVO should establish some type of art institution and pursue other work that would develop the aesthetic taste of Jewish people.⁶

In 1936 Chagall continued this discussion with YIVO and wrote several letters to raise the issue of Jewish art once again. In these letters the artist stressed the importance of establishment of a Jewish art museum. One of the main reasons for such an institution, in his opinion, was that the Jewish nation is scattered around the world, and such a museum would help to unite the Jewish diaspora. Chagall claimed that establishment of the museum should not be postponed as there is a need to discuss questions related to Jewish secular art; besides, it is important to start training experts in this field, who would introduce art in general and especially Jewish art to the nation. He also noted that Jews are often accused of not showing interest in art and it is especially important to show that these claims are not true.⁷

⁴ For example: CAPLAN, Debra. *Yiddish Empire. The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018; LISEK, Joanna. *Jung Wilne – żydowska grupa artystyczna*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2005.

⁵ For example: *Vilniaus kultūrinis gyvenimas. Tautų polilogas 1900–1945*. Ed. Alma Lapinskienė. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2012; *Abipusis pažinimas: lietuvių ir žydų kultūriniai saitai*. Ed. Jurgita Šiaučiūnaitė-Verbickienė. Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2010.

⁶ *Der altveltlekh tsuzamenfor fun yidishn visnshaftlekhn institut*. Vilne, 1936, p. 31–35.

⁷ *Der briv fun Mark Shagal. Heftn far yidisher kunst*. Vilne, 1936, november–detsember, p. 18.

This discussion illustrates that forming distinctive national art was an important task, common to members of all ethnic groups. This raises a question whether artists of different nationalities needed contacts with one another, or did they focus on development of distinctive national secular art that would help to strengthen national identity? In the case of art, both were compatible. Contacts between Jewish and non-Jewish artists began in institutions of education. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the number of Jewish students in art schools began to increase. One of the first impulses for Jewish young people to turn to secular art in Vilnius was the Drawing School led by Ivan Trutnev. His main requirement for the students was professionalism and artistic talent, so the school became a democratic space for students of different nationalities, genders, social strata, and religions.⁸ Unlike other institutions of higher education in the Russian Empire, art academies did not have *numerus clausus* for Jewish students. Moreover, a diploma of higher education could open the tightly locked exit doors of the Pale of Settlement, and this prospect was also a factor that made art studies desirable.

Despite the democratic atmosphere of the Ivan Trutnev art school, antisemitism was not something that was easily uprooted from the society. Artist Nachum Aronson described his experience in the school: “Ivan Petrovich valued me a lot and respected me, but there were unpleasant collisions between us because of antisemitism ...”⁹ It was not systematic behaviour or politics of the school, but has to be mentioned so that the situation of Jewish artists would not be idealized.

Vilnius was a multicultural city, and artists of different nationalities met and connected in art schools, which might have influenced or at least partly contributed to the establishment of the Vilnius Art Society (1908–1915). The goal of this society was to disseminate art in the Vilnius region, and everyone devoted to this aim was accepted. One of the members of Vilnius Art Society, Lithuanian artist Petras Rimša, said: “There are a lot of people in the world who consider the humanity as one common fraternity, they do not make any difference whether it is a Lithuanian, a German or a Tatar – even so a brother. Even the most passionate patriot cannot have anything against such a man, with the only condition that the man will not hurt his feelings.”¹⁰ This statement and goals of the society clearly show that it was open to artists of all nationalities.

The Vilnius Art Society began to organize spring exhibitions in 1909. Polish, Russian, and Jewish artists were active in the exhibitions, although not a lot of Lithuanians took part. Among the Jewish artists who participated were Lev Antokolsky, Moshe Leibovski, Ber Zalkind, Yakov Sher, Samuil Danishevsky, Bentsion Tsukerman, Pinchus Kremen, and Solomon (Zalmen) Strazh. Vilnius Art Society not only organized spring

⁸ LAUŽIKAS, Rimvydas. Ivano Trutnevo mokiniai. *Istorijos*, 2008 November, Nr. 11, p. 75.

⁹ AGRANOVSKIS, Henrikas. Ivano Trutnevo piešimo mokykla ir žydų dailininkai. *Žydų muziejus*. Vilnius: Valstybinis Vilniaus Gaono žydų muziejus, 2001, p. 272.

¹⁰ RIMŠA, Petras. Vilniaus Dailės Draugija. *Vilniaus žinios*, 1909 January 25, Nr. 20 (1151), p. 2.

exhibitions, but also aimed to present trends of avant-garde art to the public. Besides activities intended for the public, the society also attempted to create bonds between its members by arranging *plein air* paintings or gatherings on Saturdays to paint together.¹¹ It seems that such informal interactions connected artists not only for art but for other social issues as well. For example, when WWI broke out, members of the society came together to collect financial aid for those in need. The Lithuanian press announced: “8th of December was the day of artists. In the streets of the city financial aid was collected for those affected in Vilnius, Kaunas, Suvalkai and Gardin Governorates. A newspaper for this day was published and sold in five languages: Russian, Lithuanian, Polish, Belarusian and Yiddish.”¹²

In 1914 Vilnius Art Society once again opened a spring exhibition. Lithuanian artists, who were also members of the Lithuanian Art Society, chose to exhibit their work in an exhibition organized by their national art society. Nevertheless, the Lithuanian press did not ignore the cultural event of the multicultural Vilnius Art Society. As already mentioned, one of the goals of this society was to present new art movements. In the review of the spring exhibition, a Lithuanian journalist was not particularly impressed with the pieces of modern art and wrote that some of the rooms are so colourful that one must run out of them as quickly as possible just to save one’s nerves. Despite this criticism, the reviewer praised some aspects of the exhibition: “And what a big difference between Lithuanian exhibition and this current spring exhibition. You leave an exhibition of Lithuanian artists laden by all kinds of heavy thoughts. It is completely different in the spring exhibition. Here, seemingly, everything really has the aroma of spring, everywhere is ease, everywhere light landscapes, except one or two paintings of more serious content.”¹³

Throughout the interwar period Lithuanians, Poles and Jews took part in joint exhibitions. On one occasion, a Jewish artist showed his work in a Lithuanian Art Society exhibition: “Edelman’s (a Lithuanian Jew from Dukšai) pastel paintings (mostly depicting street life in Paris) have a lot of courage and young energy, that prompts to expect something extraordinary from this artist.”¹⁴ As can be seen from examples of reviews in the Lithuanian press, they were not driven by nationalistic prejudice, and seem to be quite objective.

Another important aspect in understanding if Jewish artists were an integral part of Vilnius art is understanding whether Jewish art was still noticed if it was shown, not in a joint multicultural exhibition, but in an exhibition of Jewish artists.

The Lithuanian press has more than once announced about exhibitions of Jewish crafts. Although this article focuses on professional art, Jewish schools for crafts have

¹¹ LAUČKAITĖ, Laima. *Vilniaus dailės draugija 1908–1915 metais: parodos katalogas*. Vilnius, 1999, p. 6–14.

¹² Dailininkų diena. *Aušra*, 1914 December 10, Nr. 48, p. 605.

¹³ K. F. VI-oji pavasarinė paveikslų paroda. *Viltis*, 1914 February 16, Nr. 39 (987), p. 1.

¹⁴ P. G. Mūsų ketvirtoji dailės paroda. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1910 April 3, Nr. 27, p. 2.

often had art classes and some artists, for example Rafael Chwoles, started their artistic path in such schools. For example, in 1911 the Lithuanian press announced the upcoming exhibition of Jewish crafts school and Antokolsky courses: “Rooms fully equipped with beautiful furniture will be shown there, as is already done in Western Europe. This kind of novelty should attract Vilnius’ public.”¹⁵ In 1925 another exhibition of Jewish craftsmen and artists was noticed by the Lithuanian press. In this event the public had an opportunity to see crafts of students of “*Hilf durkh arbet*” (Help through work) and “Ort” schools, as well as work by 15 professional artists. Unfortunately, their names were not mentioned. “Exhibition takes up a big building of Jewish community (Ožeškienės str. 7) and is remarkably interesting by its variety and richness. Usually, one can quite often hear an opinion that Jewish crafts lack beauty, aesthetic taste, style, practicality, and rigidity. This opinion is just refuted by the mentioned exhibition.”¹⁶ The article praises Jewish craftsmen and notes that there have been claims that the exhibition was organized after Jewish artists and craftsmen were not allowed to participate in a Polish exhibition, arguing that there was not enough space.

It seems that the Jews in Vilnius have also visited exhibitions organized by Poles and Lithuanians. For example, in 1931 Lithuanian artist Vytautas Kairiūkštis organized an exhibition where his works were accompanied by paintings by his former students. “It was a kind of sensation for the cultural strata of Vilnius, which has rarely seen such an interesting exhibition as this one. It is no wonder that it was abundantly visited by Lithuanian, Polish and Jewish public and received incredibly positive reviews in Vilnius’ Polish and Jewish press.”¹⁷

Interest in the work of artists of other nationalities did not end with visiting their exhibitions. Jewish artist Lev Antokolsky showed broader interest and published articles about Lithuanian artist Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis in the Russian newspaper *Severo-zapadny golos*, later republished by the Lithuanian press. It is important to stress that Antokolsky admired not only Čiurlionis’ art but also Lithuanian folk culture, which was not common: “All of these passionate actions have a goal to show the world the inexhaustible beauty and peculiarity of Lithuanian national culture.”¹⁸ The fact that the Lithuanian press has published articles written by the Jewish art critic can be taken as a proof that professionalism was more important than national interests. This statement can also be reasoned by the fact that in 1911 Antokosky was one of two representatives of Lithuania in the Second Congress of the Russian Empire Artists; the second representative was Lithuanian Antanas Žmuidzinavičius.¹⁹

¹⁵ Žinios. Prie dailės pritaikintų išdirbinių paroda. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1911 April 5, Nr. 40, p. 3.

¹⁶ Žydų paroda. *Vilniaus aidas*, 1925 April 28, Nr. 48 (53), p. 4.

¹⁷ KAIRIŪKŠTIS, Vytautas. Vilniaus lietuvių dailininkas netrukus surengs savo ir savo mokinių parodą Kaune. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1931 July 09, Nr. 151 (1229), p. 5.

¹⁸ Dailininkas L. Antokolskis apie Čiurlionį. *Lietuvos žinios*, 1911 May 10, Nr. 53, p. 2.

¹⁹ ŽMUIDZINAVIČIUS, Antanas. *Paletė ir gyvenimas*. Vilnius: Valstybinė grožinės literatūros leidykla, 1961, p. 144.

During the whole period of 1900–1939 Jewish artists took part in exhibitions with artists of other nationalities, and even in the cases when Jewish artists or craftsmen organized their own artistic events, the city’s press noticed them, and positive reviews for Jewish artists can be found quite often. This leads to the conclusion that although artists of all nationalities at this period were paving a way for national art, that did not stop them from collaboration, and Jewish artists were a part of Vilnius art.

Jewish musicians on the Vilnius stage

Music academy was another attractive option of education for Jews in the Russian Empire. Just as the art academies, they were rather liberal and did not have *numerus clausus* for Jewish students. This might be the reason why the Jewish community contributed financially to the school established by the Russian Musical Society and were sometimes invited to meetings of directorate.²⁰ Even though Jewish students were accepted by the musical school of the Russian Musical Society, the Jewish community established and supported the Jewish Music Institute (1924–1940). The institute operated according to the general programme of Polish conservatories and the best music pedagogues were teaching in the institution regardless of their nationality.²¹ According to the institute’s statute, candidates had to have an ear for music and meet the age criteria.²² It seems that candidates of all nationalities were welcome. But classes in the Jewish Music Institute were given in Yiddish, and this restricted non-Jewish students from studying in this institution. Although there might have been exceptions, for example, Vilnius-born Belarusian composer Konstantinas Galkauskas, who taught in the institute.²³

After an overview of the periodical press, it seems that the citizens of Vilnius were much more interested in classical music and good concerts than in ethnic quarrels. In 1927 Russian-born Jewish pianist Grigory Ginzburg won the Chopin contest and was invited to tour Poland, which led him to perform in Vilnius. In a letter written in 1927 he remembered: “Just as I already wrote to mother yesterday, while the tickets to the concert were being sold, there was such a hustle and scrambling, that police had

²⁰ MELNIKAS, Leonidas. Lietuvos žydų muzikinis paveldas (XIX a. pabaiga – XX a. I pusė). *Lietuvos muzikologija*, 7 t., 2006, p. 79–105.

²¹ SLEPOVITCH, D. Activities of Jewish Music Institute in Vilna as part of Post-Haskalah Yiddish movement. *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference of Judaic Studies organized by the Center “SEFER”*. Moscow, 1999, p. 265.

²² 1930 11 27, Statute of the Jewish Music Institute in Vilnius. *LLMA*, f. 272, ap. 1, b. 16, l. 1, 1 a. p., 2.

²³ Personal documents of staff and students of the Jewish Music Institute. *LLMA*, f. 272, ap. 1, b. 4, l. 13.

to watch the sale of tickets. I was followed with tears and screams. After the concert, there was a crowd in the street, even bigger than the last time.”²⁴

In comparison with other types of art, achievements of Jewish musicians were most noticeable in the Vilnius Lithuanian and Polish press. In this case, not only financial or fragmentary information can be found, but also reviews of concerts and even praise for the artists. A lot of reviews of concerts performed by the Jewish Musical Institute were published in the Vilnius Polish press. For example, in 1925, just a year after the establishment of the institute a review praised its pace of development. It was noted that most of the pedagogues had graduated from the Saint Petersburg Conservatory and the spirit of it was felt in the Vilnius institute as well. It was also noted that the institute has selected advanced students.²⁵ In a review of the students’ concert published in 1927, the event was described as one that left a deep impression.²⁶ The same year another reviewer was very surprised by the high-quality performance, he praised the technique of musicians, stating that piano class is leading among all others. It was also noted that only well-known musicians work at the Jewish Music Institute, the institution is improving, and it is the leading music school in Vilnius.²⁷

The citizens of Vilnius also had opportunities to get acquainted not only with classical music performed by Jewish musicians, but with Jewish music as well. There were a few events where artists of different nationalities performed. For example, in a concert that took place in 1916, the orchestra performed music by Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Rubinstein, and Lithuanian composer Naujalis. There also was a piano performance by Lithuanian pianist Kymantienė, songs by the Jewish artist Burstein, Polish musicians Vodinski and Borovski; Belarusians Olchovsky and Turkevich recited poetry. The poster for this event was published in five languages: German, Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian and Yiddish.²⁸ At the end of the same year another similar event took place. The poster announced performances in Lithuanian, Polish, Yiddish, and Belarusian languages. The public was promised Lithuanian dances, a performance by the Society of Jewish Artists Choir and recitation of poetry.²⁹

In 1925, Vilnius symphonic orchestra, led by Konstantinas Galkauskas, performed an evening of Jewish and Eastern music in Bernardinai garden. During the event, the public heard fragments of compositions by Rubinstein and Borodin. There were compositions announced as “Jewish dances”, “Hasidic dances” and a medley of songs from Jewish operettas.³⁰

²⁴ MELNIKAS, Leonidas. Broliai Ginzburgai ir jų įtaka Lietuvos fortepijono menui. *Menotyra*, 2006, t. 42, Nr. 1, p. 25–26.

²⁵ 1925 11 16, Review of a concert. *LLMA*, f. 272, ap. 1, b. 2, l. 1.

²⁶ 1927 01 30, Review of a concert. *LLMA*, f. 272, ap. 1, b. 2, l. 1.

²⁷ 1927 03 14 Review of a concert. *LLMA*, f. 272, ap. 1, b. 2, l. 1.

²⁸ Poster. *LLMA*, f. 702, ap. 1, b. 10, l. 1.

²⁹ Poster. *LLMA*, f. 702, ap. 1, b. 10, l. 3.

³⁰ Playbill. *LLMA*, f. 58, ap. 1, b. 36, l. 19.

As already noted, Jewish musicians really stood out in comparison with other artists. One of the reasons might be that they performed classical music which could be enjoyed and appreciated by the public of any nationality. Importantly, the Jewish Musical Institute also provided possibilities to achieve professionalism, and the achievements of its students and teachers were often praised by the press.

Splendid but unnoticed Yiddish literature

Literary scholar Mindaugas Kvietkauskas stated that specifics of Vilnius literature at the beginning of the 20th century were determined by the coexistence of different cultures. His research revealed that some of the phenomena of modern literature which were seen as incidental and inherent to certain national groups are specific to Vilnius and its multicultural environment. Kvietkauskas has stressed that this does not mean that literatures of different national groups were developing with exactly the same pace and manner – there were phenomena specific to certain groups.³¹

During the interwar period, Jews in independent Lithuania also raised the question if the multicultural environment is a positive influence on Jewish literature. Professor Nachman Shapira argued that local Lithuanian Jewish literature was a distinct form of Jewish literature. He stated that in the case of Lithuanian Jewish literature, especially written in Yiddish, its locality of development, local themes, specific Lithuanian motives, and contacts with cultures of other nations were the factors that allowed the literature to progress and reinvent itself. He stated that Lithuanian Jewish literature was growing more valuable as it became more independent from the general Jewish literature and was developing distinctively in the local Lithuanian environment.³² Literary critic Shmuel Niger was of the opposite opinion. He claimed that Jewish literature would suffer damage were it to be divided into subgroups that would be small and provincial, isolated from one another in contexts of national states.³³

It seems that Lithuanian landscape and impact of life in a multicultural environment, that allowed avoiding assimilation and nourished national cultures, had a greater impact on Jewish literature than any actual connections between Jewish and non-Jewish writers. Joanna Lisek researched the contacts of Polish and Jewish writers in interwar Vilnius. Lisek revealed that such an attempt was made in 1929 when an evening of Jewish and Polish writers was organized. After the event, the Polish press noted that Vilnius is one of the most important Jewish cultural centres not only in Poland but in

³¹ KVIETKAUSKAS, Mindaugas. *Vilniaus literatūrų kontrapunktai. Ankstyvasis modernizmas / 1904–1915*. Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2007, p. 31–45.

³² ŠAPIRA, Nachmanas. *Naujosios žydų literatūros metmenys*. Kaunas: V.D.U. Humanitarinių mokslų fakulteto leidinys, 1938.

³³ NIGER, Shmuel. *Lite un Rusland, II. Di Vokh*, 1919, Nr. 3, p. 88.

the whole of Europe; nevertheless, sublime Jewish culture is the least familiar to the nations living next to it.³⁴ After this evening, members of the Jewish PEN club were invited to take part in Literary Wednesdays organized by Polish writers, and in literary evenings at Stefan Batory University in 1929 and 1933. At that time, literary historian and editor Zalmen Reisen voiced his dream to see Jewish and Polish artists meeting not only at special events, but also in everyday life. But the strained political situation and rising antisemitism drew writers of different nationalities further from one another. A group of young Polish writers, *Żagary*, tried to change this dynamic and to bring writers of different nationalities closer by adding Belarusian, Lithuanian, and Jewish chronicles into one of their publications. *Żagary* also invited members of *Yung Vilne* to their literary events. It seems that these scarce meetings did not lead to personal friendships or professional discussions outside literary events. At the beginning of the 21st century, Czesław Miłosz told Lisek that members of *Yung Vilne* used to come to literary events of *Żagary*, but he only remembered Avrom Sutzkever as an individual.³⁵

At the time when Jewish writers were invited to take part in Polish literary evenings, the Lithuanian press was writing about disagreements caused by attempts of such rapprochement. In 1929 it was reported that during the meeting of the Union of Jewish Writers and Journalists, one of the questions was the merging of Jewish writers and Polish PEN club. However, opinions on this topic differed, causing the meeting to be abruptly cut short.³⁶

Although Jewish and Polish writers did not find ways to collaborate, Jewish readers were interested in Polish literature. Polonization of Jewish readers was evident in statistics of the Vilna Ghetto library: by October 1942, 70.4% of all the borrowed books were in Polish, 17.6% in Yiddish, 2% in Hebrew and the rest was in other languages.³⁷ This statistic is an illustration of reading habits that formed during the interwar period. Understandably, Lithuanian literature did not attract Jewish readership in Vilnius, as this was just another minority language spoken by far fewer people than Yiddish. Discussion about bringing Lithuanians and Jews closer together and becoming familiar with each other's cultures was more active in Lithuania than in Polish Vilnius.

Nevertheless, occasionally there were attempts to familiarize Lithuanians with Yiddish literature. In 1909 Lithuanian press announced an upcoming literary event: "On 24th of January Literary-artistic circle will hold a literary evening. Riversman will talk about 'Tendencies of thought of Jewish society in the second half of the past

³⁴ LISEK, Joanna. *Jung Wilne – żydowska grupa artystyczna*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2005, p. 195.

³⁵ LISEK, Joanna. *Jung Wilne – żydowska grupa artystyczna*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2005, p. 195–207.

³⁶ Žydų rašytojai nenori dėtis su lenkų rašytojais. *Vilniaus rytojus*, 1929 March 9, Nr. 6 (13), p. 8.

³⁷ KALMANOVITCH, Zelig. A Diary of the Nazi Ghetto in Vilna. *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, vol. VIII, 1953, p. 41.

century’.³⁸ Such events were an opportunity for those who do not read Yiddish or Hebrew to get acquainted with Jewish literature. Another way to introduce Jewish literature to Lithuanians or Poles was translation. Nachman Shapira published two books in Lithuanian to promote Jewish literature among Lithuanians: “Outlines of the new Jewish Literature”³⁹ and “Vilnius in New Jewish Poetry.”⁴⁰ Both examples highlight the impact of the language barrier. In types of art that do not require language understanding, such as music or fine arts, connections between artists and the interest of the public was not limited, and seems to be much more active than it was in literature.

Another, not as obvious, reason why Jewish writers in Vilnius did not form connections with writers of other nationalities might be hidden in the statement by Marc Chagall quoted earlier: Jewish artists did not have authorities. Jewish writers were in a different position as at the beginning of the 20th century. Jewish literature already had authorities, accomplished writers, and it was much clearer what is Jewish literature than what is Jewish art. Of course, Jewish writers read or drew inspiration not only from Jewish literature. Some showed interest in the folklore of other ethnic groups. For example, Uriah Katsenelenbogen translated Lithuanian folk songs into Yiddish. In the article announcing the translation was a proposal to translate Jewish folk songs to Lithuanian, as this would allow to get to know Jewish culture better and to soften the stereotypes about Jews among Lithuanians.⁴¹ It is important to note that Katsenelenbogen not only translated Lithuanian and Latvian songs and published this collection in Yiddish,⁴² but after moving to Canada he also promoted Lithuanian folk culture by translating these songs to English as well.⁴³ Two members of *Yung Vilne* were also interested in the folklore of other national groups. Perets Miranski translated Russian folk songs, and Shimshon Kahan translated Gypsy folk songs into Yiddish.⁴⁴

Jewish writers did not collaborate with writers of other nationalities, and non-Jewish readers rarely got a chance to get acquainted with Yiddish literature, but in a multicultural city like Vilnius, people formed personal and business relationships with members of other ethnic groups. Writer and public figure Antanas Valaitis wrote: “For example me, I had and still have good friend even among the black people, anamites in all corners of the earth, so here in Vilnius of course I have and will have friends not only Lithuanians, but also Poles, Jews, Belarusians, Russians, Karaites, Tatars and I

³⁸ Literatūros ir dailės ratelyje. *Vilniaus žinios*, 1909 January 25, Nr. 20 (1151), p. 3.

³⁹ ŠAPIRA, Nachmanas. *Naujosios žydų literatūros metmenys*. Kaunas: V.D.U. Humanitarinių mokslų fakulteto leidinys, 1938.

⁴⁰ ŠAPIRA, Nachmanas. *Vilnius naujojo žydų poezijos*. Kaunas: Vilniui vaduoti sąjungos leidinys, Nr. 77, 1935.

⁴¹ Lietuvių dainos žydų kalba. *Mūsų garsas*, 1925 May 1, Nr. 4 (21), p. 2–3.

⁴² KATSELENBOKEN, Uria. *Daines. Litvishe un letishe folkslider*. Toronto, 1930.

⁴³ Lietuvių ir latvių dainos angliškai. *Apžvalga*, 1935 June 23, Nr. 2, p. 7.

⁴⁴ ERTEL, Rachel. Grupinis jaunų poetų portretas. *Lietuvos žydai 1918–1940. Prarasto pasaulio aidas*. Ed. Yves Plasseraud and Henri Minczeles Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2000, p. 246.

communicated and will communicate with them.⁴⁵ Valaitis was not alone in his support and wish for friendships among people of different nationalities. There was a circle of intellectuals in Vilnius, who actively supported and developed an idea to recreate the multicultural atmosphere of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Equivalent coexistence of different nations based on citizenship was supported and promoted by: Mykolas Römeris and Tadeusz Wróblewski, Lithuanians Mykolas Biržiška, Vaclovas Biržiška, Jurgis Šaulys, Andrius Bulota; Jews Katsenelenbogen and Elijah Yakov Goldsmidt, Tsemakh Szabad, and brothers Elijah and Georg Rom.⁴⁶ Editor of the Polish newspaper *Przeгляд Wileński* Liudvik Abramovich did not only support this idea but also promoted it in the newspaper he edited. *Przeгляд Wileński* was the rare newspaper that, among other Jewish topics, published information about Jewish literature. It announced new books and even published reviews. For example, in 1924 there was an article about the new book *Pinkos*. It was described in the review as a book about Jews in Lithuania and Vilnius during the WWI and occupation, and there were articles about industry, politics, press, and culture. The review of the book also included criticism: there were no illustrations or articles about the economic and cultural life of Jews.⁴⁷ This article illustrates that *Przeгляд Wileński* did not only inform about Yiddish publications, but also gave an informative review of the book. Unfortunately, that was rather the exception than the rule in the Vilnius Lithuanian and Polish press. Although compared with other types of art in Vilnius, Yiddish literature achieved the most, but the language barrier made it out of reach to Lithuanians and Poles.

Backstage at the Vilnius theatre

The issue of the language barrier is as essential in theatre as it is in literature. But literature can be read in translation, whereas to enjoy a play in theatre, one must understand it on the spot. The language barrier was one of the reasons why Lithuanians or Poles did not get to know Jewish theatre in Vilnius nor, as a matter of fact, in other cities.

Researching Polish interwar periodical press, many publications about performances in Polish theatre can be found, but there is almost no mention of Jewish theatre. Although they usually operated only for a few years, but in the period of 1900–1939 there was more than one, for example: *Yidishe drame un komedye teater, Nayer teater,*

⁴⁵ VALAITIS, Antanas. Apie asmeninius ir visuomeninius dalykus. *Vilniaus žodis*, 1931 December 21, Nr. 23–24 (47–48), p. 4.

⁴⁶ KVIETKAUSKAS, Mindaugas. Mindaugo Biržiškos publicistika XX a. pradžios Vilniaus spaudoje: intelektualo biografijos bruožai. *Knygotyra*, 2006, Nr. 46, p. 216–217.

⁴⁷ GOLDSZTAJN, M. *Pinkos*. *Przeгляд Wileński*, 1924 February 10, Nr. 3, p. 6–7.

Folks teater, Vilner yidisher teater, Unser teater, Nayer yidisher teater,⁴⁸ puppet theatre *Maidim*. Often the same people closed one struggling theatre and opened a new one within a few years.

Jewish theatre was occasionally mentioned in the Lithuanian press, but usually only to report about the financial situation or theatre buildings. In 1925 an article noted that Lithuanians do not have the financial means to attend theatre performances, and this puts a strain on theatre. If this situation continues soon only Jewish theatres would still be open as they are in slightly better situation.⁴⁹ But in reality, Jewish theatres were struggling financially as well. In 1928, the Vilnius Society for Support of Stage Arts, often referred to as the Theatre Society, was established. In the statute of the society, it was stated that their goal is to support and seek funding for stage arts and theatre, educational and publishing activities, and to organize contests of theatre plays. A lot of work was put into improving the financial situation of theatres. For example, in 1933 the society addressed the Vilnius city magistrate asking to pass their request to the president of Poland, to give 1,000 zloty from the Jewish theatre credit for renovation of the roof of the theatre building, as its state was so serious that it was no longer possible to perform plays.⁵⁰ In most of the letters the society asked for additional funding which was needed just to cover basic needs, for example to pay for electricity otherwise it would just have been cut off.⁵¹ Economic struggles were one of the main problems of Jewish theatres. The situation was completely different for Polish ones. For example, in 1935 Polish theatres in Vilnius received 100,000 zloty in financial support, whereas Jewish theatres received only 9,000. It is interesting that according to the Yiddish press about half of Polish theatre's public consisted of Jews.⁵² This statement about the Jewish public of Polish theatre can be found in the press on more than one occasion, so it is safe to say that Jewish public was interested in Polish theatre.

Financial struggles led to quick closure of any theatre. The only exception was the puppet theatre *Maidim*, which was active from 1933 to 1941 and staged plays for the adult public depicting social and political issues with humour and satire. Short lived troupes did not manage to achieve high artistic quality. This was one of the reasons why Yiddish theatres in Vilnius received a lot of criticism. Jewish intellectuals were not satisfied with the quality of the plays as the repertoire was dominated by so-called

⁴⁸ LISEK, Joanna. *Teatras. Žydai Lietuvoje. Istorija, kultūra, paveldas*. Vilnius: R. Paknio leidykla, 2009, p. 251–253.

⁴⁹ Vilniaus teatrai. *Vilniaus aidas*, 1925 January 22, Nr. 10 (15), p. 4.

⁵⁰ 1933 07 28, Letter to Vilnius city magistrate. *LCVA*, f. 296, ap. 1, b. 42, l. 18.

⁵¹ 1933 07 28, Letter to the Electricity department of Vilnius city magistrate. *LCVA*, f. 296, ap. 1, b. 42, l. 13; 1932 12 30, Letter to the president. *LCVA*, f. 296, ap. 1, b. 24, l. 8; 1934 03 10, Letter to Vilnius city Council. *LCVA*, f. 296, ap. 1, b. 24, l. 27; 1934 02 04, Letter to Department of Education and Culture of Vilnius city magistrate. *LCVA*, f. 296, ap. 1, b. 24, l. 26; 1934 01 09, Letter to Department of Education and Culture of Vilnius city magistrate. *LCVA*, f. 296, ap. 1, b. 24, l. 22.

⁵² 1935, Yiddish publication *Teater*. *LCVA*, f. 296, ap. 1, b. 8, l. 6.

shund.⁵³ One exception was the world-renowned *Vilner trupe*. It was indeed established in Vilnius but acted in the city only for a short period of time and spent most of their career in Poland and touring the world. The Jewish community was interested in the prospect of inviting the *Vilner trupe* back to Vilnius and making the city the troupe's home base. The newspaper *Vilner tog* argued that *Vilner trupe* staying in Vilnius permanently would benefit both sides: the city would have Yiddish art theatre and the troupe would not need to travel the world and would have a permanent base.⁵⁴

As mentioned, news about Yiddish theatre in the Lithuanian or Polish press was very fragmented. There are very few cases that might suggest deeper insight. For example, in 1935 an article showed a better perception about the situation of Jewish theatre: "It is in fact disgraceful to admit that in the time when our next generation, our gymnasium students are forced to go to Polish theatre, considerably weaker Belarusian and Russian national minorities, not to mention the Jews, are concerned with reorganization of their theatre, adapting it to modern day realities and theatre quality, in the meantime we, Lithuanians, do not have Lithuanian theatre in our capital city! <...> It is enough to state the fact that the Jews, Russians and Belarusians have theatres, which are now looking for new paths of stage art <...>"⁵⁵

The low artistic quality of Yiddish theatre did not satisfy the Jewish public and might be one of the reasons why it did not attract the attention of Lithuanian or Polish press. Another rather obvious and probably the most important reason was the language barrier that left Yiddish theatre unnoticed by the Lithuanian and Polish public.

Conclusions

Secular art and classical music were the types of art where the input of Jewish artists was the most noticeable. One of the reasons why it happened might be the fact that in both cases Jewish students learnt in a rather democratic environment and established relationships with their non-Jewish fellow students, and these connections created professional opportunities. Unfortunately, there is not enough ego documentary to support this hypothesis.

Another reason why the achievements of Jewish musicians and Jewish artists were more noticed by the non-Jewish press might be the fact that neither type of art is based on language understanding. The public was not limited by language barriers.

Two types of art that are based on language understanding were the most unnoticed by the Lithuanian and Polish public. In the case of theatre, it is important to stress that

⁵³ *Shund* is a Yiddish term used to describe theatre or literature of inferior quality.

⁵⁴ Clipping from Yiddish press. *LCVA*, f. 296, ap. 1, b. 43, l. 18 a. p.

⁵⁵ Audrūnas. Esam atsakomīngi ne tik prieš dabartį, bet ir prieš ateitį. *Vilniaus žodis*, 1935 February 21, Nr. 5 (133), p. 3.

the Jewish public was also not entirely satisfied with the artistic level of performances. Yiddish literature, on the contrary, had achieved very high quality and this might have been one of the reasons why Jewish writers did not seek collaboration with writers of other nationalities. They had enough support inside of the community, and, because Yiddish was spoken in many countries, they could achieve recognition outside Vilnius with the help of their books or publications in the international Yiddish press.

The research has not revealed proof of any systematic nationalistic prejudice towards Jewish artists from the public. The reviews in Polish and Lithuanian press showed that the public was more interested in the quality of art than in the nationality of the artists. It seems that for the public the most important condition for familiarization with art was its linguistic accessibility. This leads to the conclusion that the decisive factor in cultural interactions was the language barrier, which became an obstacle in some types of art and allowed cultural co-operation in others.

There is no single answer to the question whether Jewish culture was an integral part of Vilnius culture or if it was a separate cultural space. It is obvious that it cannot be stated that Jewish artists were completely unnoticed or that they created their own national cultural space. The research has shown that the situation differed depending on the types of art, and in some cases they were an integral part of the city's cultural life.

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Žydų kultūra XX a. I pusės Vilniuje. Dalyvė ar atsiskyrėlė?

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Santrauka

Poetas Česlovas Milošas savo gimtąjį Vilnių apibūdino kaip trijų miestų junginį. Jo nuomone, žydiškasis Vilne, lenkiškasis Wilno ir lietuviškasis Vilnius gyveno atsukę vieni kitiems nugaras. Straipsnio tikslas – patvirtinti arba paneigti šią hipotezę kultūros srityje ir atsakyti į klausimą, ar tikrai Vilniaus žydų kultūra liko nepastebėta ir visiškai nepažinta šalia gyvenusių lietuvių ir lenkų.

Tyrime apžvelgiamas kultūrinis žydų ir lietuvių bei lenkų bendradarbiavimas keturiuose meno srityse: dailės, klasikinės muzikos, teatro ir literatūros. Vilniuje buvo vystoma žydų kultūra jidiš ir hebrajų kalbomis, bet kadangi Vilniaus atveju buvo pasiekta ypač daug jidiš kalbos ir kultūros srityje, tyrimo metu buvo apžvelgiama tik literatūrinė ir teatro veikla jidiš kalba.

Šiame straipsnyje kultūrinis bendradarbiavimas vertinamas dviem aspektais: aktyvaus dalyvavimo (kūrėjo) ir pasyvaus dalyvavimo (publikos). Nepavykus rasti pakankamai egodokumentų, patvirtinančių arba paneigiančių kultūrinį bendradarbiavimą (ar jo nebuvimą) tarp žydų ir lietuvių bei lenkų, tyrimo metu buvo remtasi archyviniais dokumentais ir periodinės spaudos lietuvių, lenkų ir jidiš analize.

Atliktas tyrimas leidžia daryti išvadą, kad dėl skirtingos meno rūšių specifikos bendradarbiavimo aktyvumas tarp žydų ir lietuvių bei lenkų menininkų skyrėsi, taip pat ir kūrybinių rezultatų matomumas lietuvių ir lenkų publikos akyse buvo skirtingas. Žydų dailininkai ir muzikai įsiliejo į miesto kultūrinį peizažą, o literatūra, kurios pasiekimai buvo vieni ryškiausių tarp visų meno rūšių, ir teatras lietuvių bei lenkų publikos liko beveik nepastebėti. Tyrimas taip pat atskleidė, kad kalbos barjeras tapo lemiamu faktoriumi, neleidusiu lietuviams ir lenkams bendradarbiauti meno srityse paremtose kalba. Vis dėlto tyrimo metu atlikta šaltinių analizė leidžia pagrįstai teigti, kad dalis žydų kultūros buvo pastebima ir vertinama kitataučių miesto gyventojų, todėl jos negalima vertinti kaip visiškai uždaros kultūrinės terpės.

Gauta / Received 2021 03 24
Priimta / Accepted 2021 10 07