

## THE CULTURAL LIFE OF THE VILNA GHETTO

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VILNA, KNOWN AS the Jerusalem of Lithuania, was for centuries one of the great centers of Jewish creativity. Nearly all the great modern cultural and political movements—the evolution of critical methodology and the rational analysis of rabbinic texts, the emergence of the East European Jewish Enlightenment and the rise of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, the appearance of Zionism and the Jewish Labor Movement—are closely associated with Vilna, a city where tradition and innovation harmoniously mingled.

Jewish Vilna, even as a ghetto under Nazi rule, did not betray its cultural heritage. Isaiah Trunk noted that reading "the uncommonly rich documentation of cultural activities in the Vilna ghetto, one is often tempted not to believe that such colorful, almost 'normal' cultural work took place in a ghetto where remnants of a decimated community were concentrated, constantly in danger of destruction."1

But this "normality" was of course an illusion. Many in the ghetto knew it was an illusion, perhaps even a dangerous one. In fact the Vilna ghetto was ambivalent toward its own cultural activity; the reasons for this hesitancy need to be mentioned along with the cultural achievements themselves. This ambivalence is perhaps most evident in connection with the Ghetto Theater, often regarded as the most striking form of cultural activity in the ghetto.

In August 1946, Israel Segal testified at Nuremberg that "I was director of the Ghetto Theater which the Germans forced us to keep going."2 Segal's statement is false: the Germans were quite indifferent to this aspect of the internal life of the ghetto. But after the war a sense of disbelief and shame attached itself to the very notion of theater in the ghetto, because many suspected it somehow had served German purposes. Segal was more candid in an article he wrote for a Yiddish-language journal in the same postwar year. He placed responsibility for starting the theater on Jacob Gens, the head of the Jewish police and "dictator" of the Vilna ghetto.3 But Segal's true feelings are perhaps best revealed in his speech of July 1942 at a "coffee" sponsored by the Theater Section of the Cultural Department of the Vilna ghetto on the occasion of the six-month anniversary of the Ghetto Theater. Six months was a long time in the compressed chronology of the ghetto, and Segal reminisced about Gens's first suggestion for a performance. For Segal, this proposal was "not only a daring step, it was a daring beginning to the forced normalization of ghetto life." The performance had taken place "despite the great protest of various influential persons and community activists." It had been hard to convince even fellow-actors that "theater may indeed be performed in a cemetery."4

This referred to the bitter Yiddish slogan posted by the Socialist Bund all over the ghetto in response to the announcement of the first concert: Qyf a besoylem shpilt men nit keyn teater (In a cemetery no theater ought to be performed). The Bund's action reflected widespread indignation and constituted the first open defiance of the Gens regime.5

However, no one appeared to object to the performance itself, which took place Sunday evening, January 18, 1942 - four months after the establishment of the ghetto and two months after the deportation of half its inhabitants—in the hall of the former Yiddish gymnasium where the Judenrat

had its offices, The audience was composed largely of ghetto policemen and ghetto notables with their families, but all factions sent representatives to observe whether the appropriate solemnity was maintained.<sup>6</sup> By all accounts the performance was on a high level and did not insult the feelings of the community. The program included poetry by classic Jewish authors such as Bialik and Peretz, a dramatization of a Stefan Zweig short story, a Chopin Nocturne, and a new work by the young ghetto poet Abraham Sutskever. Gens's second-in-command, the highly regarded Joseph Glazman, later one of the leaders of the resistance, opened the performance with a partial apology and a memorial prayer for the dead.<sup>7</sup>

The effect of this dignified performance in the best Vilna tradition was enormous. Some saw it as a turning point in the history of the ghetto, as Gens had intended. Dr. Lazar Epstein mentioned in his diary that he had feared the evening of theater would be a scandal, that the Germans would photograph it and use it in their propaganda. Instead, "people laughed and cried. They cast off the depression that had been weighing on their spirits. The alienation that had hitherto existed among the ghetto population seemed to have been thrown off . . . people awoke from a long, difficult dream."<sup>8</sup>

Thereafter, opposition to the Theater faded. Performances were frequent and well attended and served as a major source of revenue for ghetto charities.<sup>9</sup> As an institution, the Theater remained particularly dear to Gens, who never forgave the Bund for its handbills. For Gens, the Theater was always more than a cultural ornament or a source of employment for actors, musicians, and artists. Throughout the existence of the ghetto, the Theater remained a principal instrument of "forced normalization" and an important calming influence on a ghetto population living in constant fear and uncertainty. In a report of the Cultural Department for November 1942, this point is explicitly made:

In mid-November there spread through the ghetto unfounded rumors, which might have provoked panic, The Ghetto Theater received an order [from Gens] to organize two popular performances to calm the public. Such performances took place on November 18th and 19th.... The tickets to both performances were literally sold out in a few hours. The performances were proof of the popularity of the Ghetto Theater and of its great calming effect on the public.<sup>10</sup>

By the second production on January 25, 1942, one week after the first, doubts about the Theater had so far receded that the presence of invited German and Lithuanian dignitaries caused no public protest, whatever the private sentiments of the audience about being seated in the same hall with notorious murderers of Vilna Jews.<sup>11</sup>

The hall of the former gymnasium at 6 Rudnicka Street was evidently inadequate, and therefore plans to remodel the small municipal auditorium on Konska Street were initiated. The entrance to the auditorium was outside the ghetto, but the building itself was adjacent to the Judenrat complex on Rudnicka Street. During the period of hurried renovation, small productions under the patronage of the ghetto police continued in the old hall. The real opening of the theater season, sponsored by the Cultural Department, came on Sunday evening, April 26, 1942, in the newly completed auditorium. The diarist Herman Kruk, a Bundist and a bitter opponent of the Gens regime, managed to find a few good words for this inaugural event:

The hall is renovated and makes a good impression. The fixtures and seats are diverse in form and kind. After the opening remarks ... follows a concert by the Little Symphony Orchestra, conducted

by Durmashkin, a piano recital, and several dramatic recitals. The production was dignified, the selection of the program chaotic and at its best indicative of lack of planning.

The hall is so arranged that the first rows are occupied by the elite: the Judenrat, the police commissioners ... and then ... finally writers, artists, and others.[12](#)

The assignment of seats was significant: it changed with the political vicissitudes of various ghetto personalities. A "Chart of reserved seats of invitees to premieres-1943 Vilna ghetto" gives a rough idea of the power structure following the Gens coup d'etat of July 1942 that ended the nominal supremacy of the Judenrat. Seats in the front row center were reserved for Gens as well as for police chief Dessler, for Fryd (head of the ghetto administration and ex-chairman of the Judenrat), and their wives. On the sides and in the second row were seats for heads of administrative departments and senior police officers, as well as for influential persons, like Kaplan-Kaplanski, chairman of the Council of Brigadiers.\* Further back, rows three through five were reserved for cultural leaders like Kruk (head of the Ghetto Library), the poet Sutskever, and directors of the Hebrew and Yiddish Choruses.[13](#) For Gens, the Ghetto Theater had become the Versailles of his tiny kingdom.

*\*Leaders of labor units working for the Germans outside the ghetto, on whom Gens depended heavily for the success of his rescue-through-work strategy.*

In April 1942, the Theater gave one performance for an audience of 315 persons. During November 1942, there were nineteen performances and 5,846 patrons. The total to January 10, 1943, was 111 performances, and 34,804 tickets were sold.[14](#) Most performances continued to be revues that mixed songs, instrumental numbers, and dramatic sketches. The revue *Korene yorn un vey tsu di teg* (Years of Rye and Woe to the Days) - the title makes an obscure pun on *vey tsu* and *veytsene*: wheaten-featured songs by Kasriel Broydo, "folk poet" of the ghetto, whose simple, topical rhymes became immensely popular. In *Korene yorn*, which opened in July 1942, Broydo's hit song was "Efsher vet geshen a nes" (Perhaps a Miracle Will Occur) with the refrain:

Perhaps a miracle will occur  
Perhaps a miracle will occur  
True, it's hard to say  
It's hard to bear the burden  
But perhaps a miracle will occur.[15](#)

The revues continued in October 1942 with the opening of *Men kon gor nit visn* (You Never Can Tell). The title refers, as Kruk explains it, to the rumor-filled atmosphere of the ghetto, where the comment "you never can tell" instantly "makes you a certified wise man in the eyes of young and old."[16](#) Broydo was again the principal author. The mimeographed, semi-official ghetto newspaper *Geto yedies* reviewed the production on October 11, 1942:

'You Never Can Tell'

This secretive, playful, and intriguing slogan is the leitmotiv of the new revue at the ghetto theater. It has already played four times, each time to a packed house. The revue pleases and amuses. Most numbers grow out of our ghetto reality, showing pictures of our life with good-natured humor, often sarcastically exaggerated. A novelty is the number "Melokhe-melukhe" [The Labor State] which seeks to popularize the idea of productive labor. As a first try, it succeeded fairly well. But ... if such

productions are to achieve their aim, they must not be boring. The white net of propaganda must be invisible.<sup>17</sup>

The next revue, *Peshe fun reshe* (Peshe from Rzesza), opened in June 1943 at a time when the labor camps in the Vilna region, including Rzesza, were being liquidated and some of their inmates brought to the Vilna ghetto. Leyb Rozenthal's song for the revue, "Bayrn geto-toyer" (By the Ghetto Gate) also known as "Tsu eyns tsvey dray" (One, Two, Three) describing the selections at the time of the great deportations of the autumn of 1941, quickly became a folk song.<sup>18</sup>

The last of the revues, *Moyshe halt zikh* (Moyshe Hold On), opened during the deportations to Estonia that marked the last phase of the ghetto (August - September 1943); it was not uncommon for deportees leaving for Estonia in the morning to attend the theater for the last time the previous evening. The title song, by Broydo, was a call to endurance:

Moyshe, hold on

Hold on Moyshe

It is not far off

Soon the great hour will strike.<sup>19</sup>

The revues, for all their timeliness and popularity, give only a partial picture of theater in the ghetto. In addition, there was a little theater called *Di yogenish in fas* (The Chase Into the Barrel - a pun on Diogenes) located in the cafe at 13 Rudnicka Street. There were also numerous symphonic and choral concerts, children's performances of various kinds, a huge number of literary evenings, and various public lectures, which belonged to ghetto cultural life in the broader sense. Finally, there was an impressive series of five full-scale dramas-four in Yiddish, one in Hebrew. These were high points in the cultural life of the ghetto and belonged in the best tradition of Jewish theater in eastern Europe.

The first of these major dramas, *Grine felder* (Green Fields), opened in August 1942 and played twenty-eight times before packed houses.<sup>20</sup> It was a pastoral romance by the Yiddish-American playwright Peretz Hirschbein and was chosen, in part, to bring a feeling of nature into a ghetto where there was exactly one tree. In late November 1942, *Der mentsh untern brik* (The Man Under the Bridge) premiered, a Yiddish translation of Otto Indig's Hungarian play, substituting Jewish characters for the originals. The play deals with an unemployed physician who turns to crime, contemplates suicide, and is finally rehabilitated.<sup>21</sup> This might seem an odd choice for the ghetto, though its upbeat moral was appealing. But it must be remembered that the prewar Yiddish theater in Vilna had been very cosmopolitan, and the report of the Cultural Department for November 1942 describes the opening with great pride as "a normal European premiere, which would have been a success in Vilna even before the war."<sup>22</sup> At the end of March 1943, David Pinski's well-known comedy *Der oytser* (The Treasure) premiered. In his diary, Herman Kruk noted the contrast between this festive occasion and the brutal realities, in this case the liquidation of the provincial ghettos:

Saturday the 27th [of March], in a hall filled to capacity, there took place the premiere of *Oytser*. Outside, the police were guarding the arrivals from Swieciany, here in the theater, as if nothing were happening - a premiere! The performance is smooth, the play unblemished, the sets really beautiful-as if this were not the ghetto.<sup>23</sup>

The only Hebrew theatrical production, apart from a Hanukkah pageant produced by the homeless boys of Yeladim, was also by Pinski. His *Ha-yehudi ha-nitskhi* (The Eternal Jew) opened on June

10, 1943, under the sponsorship of the Hebrew Drama Studio, a branch of the Brit Ivrit (Hebrew Union), which in addition supported the Hebrew Chorus and a number of other Hebrew language cultural activities. This play about the Jewish revolt against Rome was chosen by the young Zionists in the ghetto. In contrast to the Yiddish theater, which had been forced to cancel a planned production of Bar Kochba for fear of the Germans, the Zionists felt free to treat the great ghetto theme of revolt because the Germans would not understand Hebrew. The production was a triumphant collective achievement: numerous Hebraists assisted in the reconstruction of the texts, and biblical costumes were made from prayer shawls for the crowd scenes.<sup>24</sup>

The last theatrical production, Der mabl (The Flood), a Yiddish translation of Syndaflo den by the Swedish dramatist Henning Berger, opened during the summer of 1943, in the last weeks of the ghetto's existence. This story of the trials of a group of people trapped in an American saloon during a flood might also seem an odd choice for the Vilna ghetto, but the moral—that people pull together during times of common danger but revert to petty divisions when the danger appears to fade—was relevant.<sup>25</sup>

Despite<sup>1</sup> ominous signs of the approaching liquidation of the ghetto, plans for the coming theater season went forward, with Sholom Aleichem's Tevye der milkhikerr (Tevye the Dairyman) as the next production. It had not yet opened when the end came in September 1943.<sup>26</sup>

The chronology of theatrical productions does not begin to do justice to the number and variety of performances that made the hall on Rudnicka Street a hub of cultural activity worthy of a large metropolis in peacetime. For the month of October 1942, which may be regarded as typical, there were, in addition to regular performances of Men kon gor nit v lsn and Grine felder, two symphonic concerts, two performances by the Yiddish Chorus, and one concert by the Hebrew Chorus.<sup>27</sup> During a special theater week in January 1943, the following played: a recreation of the first ghetto production, two performances of Grine felder, one performance of Men kon gor nit visn, and combined concerts of the Yiddish Chorus and instrumental soloists, the Pops Orchestra and jazz Ensemble, and the Hebrew Chorus and Symphony.<sup>28</sup> Performances by children who were pupils of the ghetto schools deserve special mention. Unlike much of the adult theater, these performances were not a way of escape from the reality of the ghetto. Instead, recitals of Peretz and Bialik, with singing and dancing, reminded the audience of children taken away and of the danger that soon the performing children would also perish. Audiences generally immune to grief wept unashamedly: "A full hall of people crying. It is hard to convey what it means today to cry in the Vilna ghetto..."<sup>29</sup>

In addition to officially sponsored cultural projects, there existed two so-called autonomous cultural groups. One was the Association of Writers and Artists; the second, The Workers' Lectures of the Council of Brigadiers. The Gens regime did not easily tolerate autonomous activity within the ghetto. It was especially eager to receive the approval of the intellectuals for its policies, even when this involved the sacrifice of thousands of Jewish lives. The Vilna Jewish intelligentsia tried to preserve its integrity, but was unable to resist Gens. In contrast, the Brigadiers remained a strong, indeed a growing and independent force to the end; their labor units were essential to the survival of the ghetto.

The Association of Writers and Artists was one of several institutions—the Communal Relief Committee was another—that in the early days of the ghetto existed outside the Judenrat and were

considered by many to be more authentic and democratic than their official counterparts. Certainly the Association was in the genuine tradition of Vilna Jewish high culture. It was founded quite early in the history of the ghetto-on January 18, 1942, which was also the date of the first "police-sponsored" event. Its initial membership consisted of twenty writers, twenty-two stage performers, sixteen musicians and singers, and six painters, plus fifteen families of deported writers and artists. The goal of the new group was self- help, including attempts to improve the catastrophic economic conditions of the surviving intelligentsia, to encourage cultural creativity, and to preserve the works and memory of murdered colleagues.<sup>30</sup> In addition, at the first meeting of the directors of the Association, on February 9, 1942, it was decided to collect materials on ghetto life.<sup>31</sup>

Soon thereafter, the Association began its series of weekly or fortnightly Saturday night "evenings," each devoted to a particular cultural theme and conducted by one or two main speakers and several discussants. These events quickly became popular, and the communal kitchen at 17 Swawelska where they were held was often jammed.<sup>32</sup> The range of topics was broad, including talks on particular Jewish communities (Vilna, Warsaw), holidays (Purim, Shavuot), writers (Bialik), art (Chagall), music, and subjects bearing directly on ghetto conditions (Werfel's novel *Fury Days of Musa Dagh*).<sup>33</sup> More elaborate programs were held in the Ghetto Theater hall, including a "Peretz Academy" and a "Sholom Aleichem Morning."<sup>34</sup>

The activities of the Association spread rapidly to intellectual and professional areas outside its original scope. The physicians undertook a series of medical- scientific lectures, and the teachers sponsored their own Friday lectures. The orthodox community held talks on Jewish history in one of the ghetto kloyzn (houses of study).<sup>35</sup> By June 1942 the Association had also created a Scientific Circle, which was divided into sections for mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, linguistics, philosophy, and social science. The ethnography course offered by the philosophy/ social science section can serve to illustrate the serious intent of these groups. This course included lectures on "The Myth of the Garden of Eden in the Light of Psychoanalysis" and "The CulturalHistorical School in Ethnography."<sup>36</sup>

Despite its popular success, the Association did not manage easily in the ghetto. The income from its "evenings" and other public programs was minimal-perhaps 120 rubles (or 12 Reichsmarks) from each, at a time when a kilogram of bread cost about 80 rubles. The Association had obligated itself to provide material assistance for its impoverished members and for the families of intellectuals who had perished. In the period from February to June 1942, sixty-four persons received cash grants, averaging about 200 rubles each, plus food, bedding, and even the labor certificates without which no one could legally live in the ghetto.<sup>37</sup> Private donations were insufficient and tended to come from dubious sources such as Weisskop, the "ghetto millionaire"; Levas, the head of the ghetto gate watch; and Fryd, the ex-chairman of the Judenrat. All three were widely despised in the ghetto.<sup>38</sup> Inevitably, therefore, the Association came to depend on the ghetto administration, and especially on Jacob Gens. For a time Gens had attempted to sponsor a competing series of Wednesday evening teas in his own residence, a kind of salon for intellectuals and political leaders, but he soon co-opted the Association itself, offering 3,000 rubles in prize money for the two works in journalism and literature to be chosen by the Association. The Association agreed and offered the journalism award to ghetto librarian and diarist Herman Kruk for his "underground journalistic achievement." Kruk declined, since, as a Bundist, he was perpetually at odds with Gens, and he used the occasion to announce his departure from the Association he had helped to found.<sup>39</sup>

The literary prize of 1,700 rubles went to the young poet Abraham Sutskever for his dramatic poem *Dos keyver-kind* (The Grave-Child), which had been presented to the Association in May 1942 and received great acclaim.<sup>40</sup> In this powerful work, a gravedigger, the last Jewish survivor, was about to descend into his own grave when he encountered a woman in labor and recognized the child to be the Messiah. Triumphantly he sang:

Born is the wonder, born the child  
In the holy nettle-pit, in darkness.<sup>41</sup>

Subsequently, the Association declined. It was replaced on juries in later contests by panelists nominated directly by Gens.<sup>42</sup> Literary and artistic competitions, however, continued with great vigor. A few weeks after the first awards three new prizes were announced for works on ghetto life in Yiddish or Hebrew—one each for poetry, fiction, and drama, to be submitted by August 25, 1942.<sup>43</sup> No play appears to have qualified; prizes went to Israel Dimentman for a Hebrew novel, *Ad ha-sha'ar* (Up to the Gate), dealing with the liquidation of the "little ghetto," which had existed for only a few weeks, and to Leah Rudnitsky for her long Yiddish poem, *Khurban lite* (The Destruction of [Jewish] Lithuania).<sup>44</sup> An ambitious triple competition in Gens's name was announced in December 1942 with prizes awarded in February 1943, in art and music as well as literature. The list of entries, the composers' pseudonyms, and the judges' comments in the musical competition read like a fairy tale. First prize of 2,500 rubles went to *Elegie* for his *Elegy for Large Orchestra*, described as "professional but not totally original"; second prize of 2,000 rubles was won by *Fermata* for his *Mozartiada*, though it "deviates slightly from Mozart's style"; the "primitive but melodic" *Waltz by Allegro* won third prize of 1,000 rubles, while *Ghetto Song and Melody with Five Variations*, two works by Penna— "a beginner, but shows talent"—received the fourth prize of 500 rubles.<sup>45</sup> The art jury awarded no first prize, but Rachel Sutskever, a cousin of the poet, received 2,500 rubles for her *Portrait of a Man*, described as "the most mature" entry.<sup>46</sup>

The painting competition, not very successful in itself, seems to have generated the idea of an art exhibition—paintings, graphics, sculpture—to be held in the lobby of the Ghetto Theater. Entries submitted were passed on by a jury, and the exhibit opened on March 28, 1943. Kruk noted that "in the exhibit hall one feels surrounded by warmth: pictures, paintings, sculptures, projects, and among them much unique ghetto art." There were drawings of ghetto scenes by Sher, posters depicting ghetto occupations, and caricatures. There were parts of the "three-dimensional plan" of Vilna—an elaborate scale-model view of the city commissioned by the Germans.

The drawings by nine-year-old Shmuel Bak (who survived the war to become a well-known Israeli artist) and by Rachel Sutskever struck Kruk as among the most notable.<sup>47</sup> On the day after the opening, Jaszunski, the head of the Cultural Department of the ghetto administration, proposed to Gens that one of Sutskever's paintings, an oil of a scene in the Little Ghetto (Vilna ghetto no. 2), and two works by Yudl Mut, the sculpture *Two Jews Discuss Politics* and the album of drawings *Vilna Ghetto*, be purchased for the projected ghetto museum.<sup>48</sup>

Jacob Gens's appetite for competitions and his desire to emerge from the war not only as the savior of the remnant of Vilna Jewry but as custodian of its cultural heritage, continued to the end. New prizes were announced for the summer of 1943, and Gens was busy commissioning works for a projected ghetto publishing house whose titles would appear after the war.<sup>49</sup>

The Workers' League of the Council of Brigadiers was the other autonomous cultural enterprise in the Vilna ghetto. The Brigadiers were influential people who used their independence to sponsor their own cultural programs, distinct from both the official activities of the Cultural Department and the high culture of the Association. They sponsored the Workers' Lectures that began on May 15, 1942, on the occasion of the opening of the teahouse at 7 Rudnicka Street.<sup>50</sup> This location, considered the most desirable in the ghetto, was the spacious premises of the former Vilna Jewish Bank.<sup>51</sup>

Initially, the lectures were sponsored by Kaplan-Kaplanski's own unit. They were held every Sunday on a variety of cultural subjects; they included expositions of the activities of a number of ghetto institutions such as the ghetto court, the Cultural Department, and the Health Department. By December 20, 1942, there were twenty-five free Sunday teahouse talks before capacity audiences of 200-300 people, many of whom attended no other cultural activities in the ghetto. Indeed, these Sunday talks became too big an enterprise to be handled by one brigade, and Kaplan-Kaplanski requested that they be taken over by the Council of Brigadiers.<sup>52</sup> Under the Council, chaired by Kaplan-Kaplanski, the lectures continued to thrive. The same editorial in the *Geto yedies* that lamented the inactivity of the Association praised the Brigadiers' series, whose "number of patrons grows from day to day."<sup>53</sup> The lectures branched out to include not only the workers of the brigades but also the youth of the ghetto. A number of programs were held in conjunction with the Youth Club, a culturally active group of students in the ghetto gymnasium and their working comrades. The Youth Club was also a major source of recruits for the United Partisan Organization (FPO).<sup>54</sup>

The lectures continued until the last weeks of the ghetto. When the hall at 7 Rudnicka Street had to be turned into a dormitory for those forced to leave the provincial ghettos and labor camps, the series was transferred to the Ghetto Theater.<sup>55</sup> Herman Kruk, who was no great admirer of the Council of Brigadiers in general or of Kaplan-Kaplanski in particular, wrote on July 4, 1943:

The Workers' Lectures [Series] ... about which we have written more than once, is today celebrating its fiftieth workers' lecture. Its founder and organizer, Mr. Kaplan-Kaplanski, certainly deserves to be congratulated for this institution.<sup>56</sup>

The name of the diarist Kruk is closely connected with the history of yet another cultural phenomenon in the ghetto—the cluster of institutions centering on the Ghetto Library at 6 Straszuna Street. Before the war this building had been the home of the wellknown Hebrew-Yiddish library of the society *Mefitsei haskalah* (Dissemination of Enlightenment). In the early days of the German occupation, before the formation of the ghetto, it was the seat of the first *Judenrat*. With the advent of the ghetto it came to house not only the library and reading room, but also the Ghetto Bookstore, the Ghetto Archive and Statistical Bureau, and the so-called Ghetto Museum. In fact, it was a huge cultural bunker where whatever could be saved of the treasures of Jewish life in Vilna and its surroundings was hidden.

The Library was the core of this complex and one of the most important institutions of the entire ghetto. Though the *Mefitsei haskalah* collection had been successively pillaged by the Lithuanians in 1939, the Soviets in 1940, and the Germans in 1941, most of the books (36,000 out of 45,000) were still there when the reorganization of the Library began on September 8, 1941, a mere two days after the establishment of the ghetto. In the course of the month of September two catalogues were prepared, shelving and damaged books were repaired, and 1,485 subscribers were registered (for a



fee of 1.50 rubles plus a 5 ruble deposit) with an average of 400 books lent daily. A large number of new acquisitions were obtained from abandoned apartments, synagogues, and publishing houses. Indeed, the transfer of ownerless books to the Library was made obligatory by the Judenrat.<sup>57</sup> By September 18, Kruk, formerly librarian of the Grosser Library in Warsaw, had been chosen to head the Ghetto Library; he wrote:

The Library, which is already operating under the supervision of Comrade [Kruk], has become a true cultural center here ... Here meet all those who were cultural activists (kultur-tuerl and had some connection with culture, literature, etc.<sup>58</sup>

Much of what was accomplished that first month was undone during the Yom Kippur and "Yellow Certificate" deportations of October and early November. The premises were ransacked twice and thousands of actual and potential users were taken away to the killing-grounds of Ponary.

Nevertheless, the Library was open twenty-four days during October and the number of subscribers actually increased (from 1,485 on October 1, 1941 to 1,739 on October 31). In his report for October, Kruk could not conceal his amazement: "October 1, 1941-Yom Kippur, some 3,000 Jews taken away. And on the morrow, 390 books changed hands."<sup>59</sup>

For a brief period after the liquidation of the so-called Little Ghetto (or Vilna ghetto no. 2), with which the main ghetto had had almost no contact during its brief existence, it was possible to smuggle in books and manuscripts from the collections inside the boundaries of the former Little Ghetto. Here, within the historic shulhoyf, adjacent to the famed Great Synagogue, stood the Straszun Library, a portion of whose vast holdings could be rescued, along with the religious works from the collection of the late Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzenski.<sup>60</sup>

Despite serious problems (the premises had to be closed for six weeks in early January 1942 for fear of a typhus epidemic, and the newly established reading room stayed closed until May for lack of heat), the Library had come into its own by mid- 1942. It was a place of spiritual and also of relative physical comfort. A bathhouse on the floor below the reading room permitted the use of excess steam and served as a kind of central heating. As recalled after the war by Kruk's young assistant, Dina Abrarnowicz, a typical day in the Library began with the "society ladies" - privileged women whose husbands worked outside the ghetto and who did not work themselves- interested in novels. The children came in the afternoons; they preferred Yiddish-language adventure stories; in the evening the workers returning from their hard labor outside the ghetto seemed to like Polish translations of the classics of world literature.<sup>61</sup> Another survivor remembered the reading room where Khaykl Lunski, former librarian of the Straszun Library and a well-known bibliophile and historian of Vilna, urged him to write about his experiences so that the remnant of Israel might remember the catastrophe.<sup>62</sup>

On December 13, 1942, the entire ghetto celebrated the loan of the one hundred thousandth book in the Library with great festivity.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile the Library staff had undertaken to write a systematic history of its first year, entitled "Ghetto Library and Ghetto Reader." It appeared in early March 1943, typewritten, with handmade but professional-looking tables and diagrams. For future historians, Kruk thought, "this will surely be a good contribution to the study of the cultural activity in the Vilna ghetto." This remarkable twenty-eight-page report has survived and serves the purpose for which it was intended.<sup>64</sup> The authors of the report recalled that

. . . the speedy initiative to transform the Mefitsei Haskalah library into a ghetto library can be interpreted-primarily-as a desire to rescue the library in principle. That books should be read in the ghetto, few could have believed. At any rate, so it appeared on September 8, 1941, the day the library was "captured." But as soon as the library was made accessible to the ghetto readers on September 15, the aforementioned theories were shown to be far from true: like thirsty lambs the new ghetto citizens threw themselves upon the books.[65](#)

They did this as "a narcotic, an intoxicant, in order to forget , but also in order to grapple with their condition and find analogies in books on war (War and Peace, All Quiet on the Western Front); on Jewish history (books on medieval persecutions); and on resistance (notably the extremely popular Foro Days of Musa Dagh).[66](#)

The number of subscribers was as surprising (4,700 as of September 1942) as was the pattern of their reading habits: though Polish- language books constituted less than 20 percent of the holdings (7,000 out of 39,000 books), they consistently made up over 70 percent of all books lent out; and although Vilna was the citadel of Yiddishism, and Yiddish was the language of the ghetto streets and of the internal administration, Yiddish-language books (of which the Library had some 10,000) never constituted even 20 percent of those on loan. Russian, Hebrew, and other languages trailed behind.[67](#) But the Yiddish authors of the report had no quarrel with ghetto readers. The "miracle of the book," as they called it, was enough. They described the reading room with its encyclopedias and reference works as "a home and place of study for the better reader, " where people study, write, and CC come here to rest, to sit on a normal chair, and at a normal table...."[68](#)

The Library opened "branches" in places like the children's home, the Youth Club, the kailis factory (whose workers lived in a separate block outside the ghetto), and even the ghetto jail.[69](#) A bookstore and also a newspaper kiosk were connected to the Library; the latter carried viciously antisemitic but still widely read Vilna dailies in Polish, Lithuanian, and German, as well as a wide selection of Reich newspapers like the Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung.[70](#) Elsewhere in the "culture house" at 6 Straszuna Street, the Statistical Department and Ghetto Archives, repository of all official ghetto documents, issued statistical bulletins dealing with every aspect of ghetto life (food, health, welfare, labor, police, culture, etc.), while the Ghetto Museum accumulated thousands of ritual objects, works of art, manuscripts, rare books, etc. Much of this material came by way of the "Paper Brigade," the forty workers of the Einsatzstab Retchsleiter Rosenberg employed at the former YIVO premises outside the ghetto in collecting material for a Nazi institute to study the Jewish question. In fact these workers mostly spent their time smuggling valuables into the ghetto. Six of the forty were also members of the FPO, and the valuables they brought into the ghetto included weapons and ammunition for the resistance movement, one of whose caches was located in 6 Straszuna Street.[71](#)

It is precisely under this dual I sign of culture and resistance that the Vilna ghetto takes its place in history. Without resistance, culture might have served only as a "narcotic," a legitimation of the police regime. But culture provided the sense of humanity and self-worth that made the idea of resistance possible. Culture linked the ghetto residents to a rich past and to the triumphant survival of the Jewish people. When Zelig Kalmanovich, who embodied much of nusach Vilne (the special Vilna style of all-embracing jewishness), learned in the ghetto that his beloved YIVO was carrying forward its activities in America, this secularjew wrote in his diary:

Thus, Lord of the Universe, houses of wood are destroyed and You replace them with stone edifices. All is for the sake of Thy name, regardless of whether it be known or concealed from the outer eye.<sup>72</sup>

### **NOTES**

1. Isaiah Trunk, judenrat (New York, 1972), 219,
2. Nuremberg Document D-966 (Affidavit).
3. Israel Segal, "Der ershter kontsert in vilner geto, " Fun letstn khurbn I (Munich, 1946): 12-13.
4. YIVO Archives, New York, Sutskever-Kaczergin ski Collection, No. 476, July 24, 1942 [hereafter cited as YIVO Archive, SK Coll.].
5. Most sources for the history of the Vilna ghetto allude to this incident. See Mark Dworzecki, Yerushalayim de-lite in kamf un umkum (Paris, 1948), 248-249; Herman Kruk, Togbukhjun vilnergeto (New York, 1941), 136 (January 19, 1942); Mashe Rolnik, Ikh muz dertsgln (Warsaw and Moscow, 1965), 78; Borukh Merin, Fun rakev biz kloge (New York, 1969), 102,
6. Dworzecki, Yerushalayim? de-lite, 249; Kruk, Togbukh, 138-139 Uanu- ary 19, 1942).
7. Dworzecki, Yerushalayim de-lite, 249.
8. Yad Vashem Archive Jerusalem, Diary of Dr. Lazar Epstein, un- published manuscript, 36.
9. Already at the first concert 4,000 rubles were raised. Kruk, Tog- bukh, 139 (January 19, 1942).
10. Report of the Cultural Department for November 1942, dated December 12, 1942, YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 349 (my translation). The rumors were to the effect that following the liquidation of several small provincial ghettos, the Vilna ghetto would be liquidated next.
11. Kruk, Togbukh, 146-147 (January 26, 1942).
12. Ibid., 244 (April 27, 1942). YIVO Annual 73 (1976): 33-34 also con- tains a translation.
13. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 308.
14. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 409. By the time the ghetto was liq- uidated in September 1943, the total must have been twice as great. The population of the ghetto after the 1941 deportations did not exceed 20,000.
15. Dworzecki, Yerushalayim de-lite, 279.
16. Kruk, Togbukh, 358-359 (September 28 or 29, 1942).

17. Getoyedies 8 (October 11, 1942).
18. Dworzecki, Yerushalayim de-lite, 260.
19. Ibid., 456, 458.
20. Report of the Cultural Department for the second half of July 1942, dated July 30, 1942. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 346; " Peretz Hirsch- beins Grinefelder in vilner geto, " Zukunft 53, no. 8 (October 1948): 611.
21. See the review in the New York Times (November 15, 1933) of a Budapest performance.
22. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 349 (December 2, 1942).
23. Kruk, Togbukh, 487 (March 29, 1943).
24. Dworzecki, Yerushalayim de-lite, 252-254. Even the anti-Zionist Kruk was impressed, despite the large number of policemen in the cast. Kruk, Togbukh, 570-71 (June 12, 1943).
25. For a review of the New York production of this play, see the New York Times (January 28, 1922).
26. Dworzecki, Yerushalayim de-lite, 250.
27. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 412. There were also three popular talks on medical themes, a music school recital, a memorial meeting for a recently deceased teacher, and a meeting of the Teachers' Association, all using the theater hall.
28. Getoyedies 25 Uanuary 24, 1943); YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 276.
29. Kruk, Togbukh, 195 (March 8, 1942).
30. Ibid., 139-140 (January 20, 1942).
31. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 437a.
32. Kruk, Togbukh, 195 (March 8, 1942); 251 (May 2, 1942).
33. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 445 (no date, but probably Septem- ber 1942), contains a list of eighteen evenings to date. Additional topics are mentioned in Dworzecki, Yerushalayim de-lite, 239-240; Kruk, Togbukh, passim; and Zelig Kalmanovich, "A Diary of the Nazi Ghetto in Vilna," YIVO Annual 8 (1953): 47.
34. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 445.
35. Kruk, Togbukh, 235 (April 20, 1942).

36. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 461; Kruk, Togbukh, 235 (April 20, 1942); 345 (September 10, 1942).
37. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., Nos. 439, 358.
38. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 429.
39. Kruk, Togbukh, 262 (May 14, 1942); 293-294 (July 2 or 3, 1942).
40. Ibid., 254 (May 6, 1942). Also YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 439.
41. A. Sutskever, *Difestung* (New York, 1945), 105-112.
42. *Getoyedies* 26 (February 14, 1943); YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 245.
43. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 464.
44. Dworzecki, *Yerushalayin'l de-lite*, 308. According to Dworzecki, the awarding of these prizes was the occasion for Gens's famous self-justifying speech before the cultural elite of the ghetto: "I calculate in Jewish blood and not in Jewish honor." (This was the period-October 1942- of the participation of the Vilna ghetto police in the liquidation of the Oszmiana ghetto.)
45. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 456, dated February 13th. "Elegie" was V. Durmashkin, director of the Hebrew Chorus; "Penna" was the twelve-year-old Alek Wolkowiski, the ghetto prodigy, who wrote the music for Kaczerginski's well-known poem "Shtiler, shtiler" about Ponary, the place outside Vilna where most of the Jews of the city were killed.
46. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 468, dated February 7, 1943.
47. Kruk, Togbukh, 487-488 (March 29, 1943); YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 467.
48. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 465, Jaszurski to Gens, March 29, 1943.
49. Kruk, Togbukh, 527 (April 30, 1943); Dworzecki, *Yerushalayin'l de-lite*, 257. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 252, Report of the Cultural Department for March 1943 mentions that Dr. Gordon received an advance for his 'A Priori' Foundations of History and that Leyb Turbovich received 500 rubles for his ongoing work on a history of the Jews in Vilna.
50. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 522.
51. M. Balberyszski, *Shtarkerfun ayzn* (Tel Aviv, 1967), 342.
52. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 522, List of the first twenty-six meetings of the Workers' Lectures; No. 524, Kaplan -Kaplanski to the Council of Brigadiers, December 25, 1942.
53. *Getoyedies* 26 (February 14, 1943); YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 245.

54. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 519, Announcement of the 42nd Workers' Lecture on Eliakurn Zunser. See also Diary of Yitzhak Rudashevski, typescript in Yad Vashem Archive, Jerusalem, p. 50 (October 4, 1942); p. 57 (October 21, 1942). [Hebrew translation: Yornano shel naar mi-vilna (Lochamei ha-Getaot, 1968)]. On the Youth Club see A. Zheleznykov, "Tsvishn vent-dokh yung," in *Bleter vegn vilne* (Lodz, 1947), 28-30.
55. *Getoyedies* 32 (NParch 28, 1943); YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 267.
56. Kruk, *Togbukh*, 594.
57. Herman Kruk, Information- Report of all offices located at 6 Straszuna Street (n.d. [ca. October 10, 1941]), reproduced in M. Balberyszski, *Shtarker*, 437-438. A reminder regarding transfer of ownerless books, September 27, 1941, is found in YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 308.
58. Kruk, *Togbukh*, 81.
59. Reproduced in Balberyszski, *Shtarker*, 438-439.
60. Kruk, *Togbukh*, 97 (December 25, 1941), 152 (January 13, 1942), and *passim*; YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 345, Report of all offices located at 6 Straszuna Street for January 1942.
61. Dina Abramowicz, "Vilner geto-bibliotek" in *Lite*, eds. M. Sudarski, U. Katzenelenbogen, 1. Kissin (New York, 1951), cols. 1671-1678.
62. A. Aj zcn, *Dos gaystike ponim fun geto* (Mexico, 1950), 156-158.
63. Kruk, *Togbukh*, 418-419 (December 13, 1942); Kalmanovich, "Diary," 41 (December 13, 1942).
64. Kruk, *Togbukh*, 465 (March 3, 1943); YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 307, *Ghetto Library and Ghetto Reader*, September 15, 1941-September 15, 1942.
65. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 307, *Ghetto Library and Ghetto Reader*, p. 21.
66. *Ibid.*, 22-25.
67. *Ibid.*, table 1, p. 22, p. 26. Russian-language books were, however, gaining in popularity, perhaps due to the difficulty of obtaining Polish books. Many Vilna Jews could read three or four languages; it is likely that Polish books were preferred primarily because most novels were in that language. In later months a welcome shift toward Yiddish was noted- to 13.7 percent in December 1942. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 288, *Ghetto Statistics for the Second Half of 1942*, p. 11.
68. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 307, *Ghetto Library and Ghetto Reader*, 27-28.
69. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 607.
70. YIVO Archive, SK Coll., No. 378, bill to Library from Kiosk for June 1943.

71. See Ruzhka Korczak, *Lehavot be-efer*, (3rd ed.; Merhavia, 1965), 94-98. The author was one of the six. Two others also wrote important memoirs of the Vilna ghetto: Shmerke Kaczerginski, *Khurbn vitne* (New York, 1947), and Abraham Sutskever, *Vilner geto* (Paris, 1946).

72. Kalmanovich, "Diary," 55-56 (June 18, 1943).