

## *Poetics of Distance: Zalman Shneour in Berlin during the First World War and Its Aftermath\**

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Today here tomorrow somewhere else [...] one's cases must always be ready [...] one has to always sleep fully dressed and wearing one's dirty wandering boots.<sup>1</sup>

It is as if you keep running across the world but keep returning to the same place.<sup>2</sup>

There seems to be, after all, one consistent characteristic in the rich and diverse history of modern Jewish literature, a literature whose general traits, outlines, and starting point, as well as its very designation, are all under debate.<sup>3</sup> That common denominator is the exceptional mobility of modern Jewish writers from the late nineteenth century until the First World War.<sup>4</sup>

It is not merely modern Jewish writers who have been identified with a certain “restless mobility”, to quote Shachar Pinsker,<sup>5</sup> European-Jewish literature as such includes a wide range of locations: Perets Smolenskin, and later on David Vogel and Gershom Shofman describe Vienna; Petersburg is described by Bershadsky and subsequently by Sholem Asch; Odessa is the city of Reuben Asher Braudes’s

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<sup>1</sup> “היינט דאָ און מאָרגן דאָרטן. [און דער פּעקל מוז אַלע זיין גרייט. . . [און מען מוז אַלע מאָל שלאָפֿן ניש קיין אויגעהווענענער, אין די קליידער, אין די קויטיקע וואַנדער-שטייול”

Zalman Shneour, ‘Auf beide seiten Dniester’ [On the two banks of the Dniester] [Yiddish], in *Gezamelte Schriften* [Collected Works] Warsaw 1909, p. 6. All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> “כאילו אתה רץ ורץ בעולם וחוזר חמיר אל נקודת המוצא”

Zalman Shneour, *David Frishman va-aherim* [David Frishman and others] [Hebrew], Tel Aviv 1959, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of some of the conflicts that accompany the historiographical description of Jewish literature, see Dan Miron, ‘Prologue: Old Questions; Do They Deserve New Answers?’, in Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Towards a New Literary Thinking*, Stanford, CA 2010, pp. 3–19.

<sup>4</sup> This has been widely discussed in the research, from Shimon Halkin in 1958 to Shachar Pinsker and Allison Schachter in their recent books: Shimon Halkin, *Ha-nayadut shel Ha-yozzer Ha-ivry* [The mobility of the Hebrew author] [Hebrew] in *Muskamot vemashberim besifrutenu* [Conventions and crisis in Hebrew literature] [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1980, pp. 88–92; Shachar M. Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe*, Stanford, CA 2011; Allison Schachter, *Diasporic Modernisms: Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Pinsker, *Literary Passports*, p. 7.

novels and appears later on in Mendele's work, while Warsaw is the site of Nomberg's and Klazkau's short stories, and London features in works by Smolenskin, Brenner, and Bergelson. As Shimon Halkin has remarked, even the river Seine and the Swiss Alps entered Jewish literature via Zalman Shneour's poetry.<sup>6</sup>

The bilingual Yiddish-Hebrew author Zalman Shneour, born in Shklov in 1887, might well qualify as one of the most restless Jewish writers of his time.<sup>7</sup> This is only one of the facts of his life and poetic work that make him an exemplary figure for the study of the development of modern Jewish literature during the first half of the twentieth century. However, to this day only a few studies have been dedicated to Zalman Shneour's writing;<sup>8</sup> therefore this article's preliminary goal is to provide the reader with an introductory view of his literary work taken in its historical context. Focusing on Shneour's shift from Hebrew poetry to popular Yiddish prose, I shall present an important chapter in his evolution as a writer and suggest a new critical perspective on the literary representation of his own native environment among prewar Russian Jewry.

World War I marks an important step in the development of Shneour's poetics. He stayed in Berlin during the war, maintaining there a singular position as an eastern European Jewish author. His literary work written in Berlin during the war expresses a lesser-known aspect of what Steven Aschheim calls "the cult of the Ostjude".<sup>9</sup> Shneour was both part of eastern European Jewish culture and an outsider who came to adopt German-Jewish artists' romantic perspective on eastern European Jewry.

Of the different locations in which Shneour worked, including Odessa, New York, and Tel Aviv, it was in Berlin that the most important stage in his evolution as a writer began. His exposure there to western European representations of the East changed the course of his writing and left a lasting mark on his representation of eastern European Jewry as it eventually appeared in his best-known Yiddish prose such as, notably, *Shklover Yidden* (The Jews of Shklov).<sup>10</sup>

In what follows, I demonstrate how Shneour's stay in Berlin enabled him to evolve a new understanding of distance as a valuable poetic perspective. In the first part of this article, I shall present his writing itinerary, leading from the established

<sup>6</sup> Halkin, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> A 1963 English translation of a collection of Shneour's works was entitled *Restless Spirit*. See Zalman Shneour, *Restless Spirit: Selected Writings of Zalman Shneour*, transl. by Moshe Spiegel, New York-London 1963.

<sup>8</sup> A comprehensive study on Zalman Shneour, presenting the true extent of his literary work, is still to be written. Among the most recent studies are prefaces to the latest editions of Shneour's most familiar works and a few academic investigations. The main sources include Dan Miron's detailed article published in the most recent Hebrew edition of the serialized novel *Anshey Shklov* [The Jews of Shklov] (Tel Aviv 1999); Ellen Kellman's PhD dissertation on the newspaper novel, which includes an important chapter on Shneour's Yiddish work (Columbia University, under the supervision of Prof. Dan Miron, 2000); Hannan Hever's preface to a collection of Shneour's Hebrew poetry, *Yemei Ha-beinayim mitkarvim!* (Tel Aviv 2011); and Reviva Tal's MA thesis on Zalman Shneour in Berlin (Tel Aviv University, under the supervision of Prof. Dan Laor, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800-1923*, Madison-London 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Zalman Shneour, *Shklover Yidden* [The Jews of Shklov] [Yiddish], Warsaw-Vilna 1929.

centres of Jewish literature in Russia to Berlin, where I closely follow the gradual development of his poetics of distance. The second part of this article focuses on the poem *Vilna*, written in 1917 and published in Berlin in 1923 with illustrations by Hermann Struck.<sup>11</sup> Situated in the context of German representations of eastern European Jewry, and in particular with reference to Arnold Zweig and Hermann Struck's book *Das ostjüdische Antlitz*,<sup>12</sup> this poem marks a turning point in Shneour's representation of the old Jewish world. Moreover, by its implied correspondence with Zweig and Struck's description of Lithuania, Shneour's *Vilna* suggests that Berlin played a significant role in the development of the poetics of representation of the old Jewish world in interwar Hebrew and Yiddish literature.

### ZALMAN SHNEOUR'S WRITING ITINERARY

The first step in understanding an immigrant author whose national perspectives are articulated throughout his work would be to follow the path of his wanderings and to extract the symbolic itinerary it designates. Shneour's wanderings began as early as 1900, when he travelled from his native town of Shklov to the city of Odessa. He then frequented the established Jewish literary centres of Vilnius and Warsaw. After the first Russian revolution in 1905, he left Czarist Russia for the first time and travelled to the university cities of Switzerland. After short stays in Geneva and Bern, he arrived in Berlin and later in Paris, where he settled for relatively longer periods of time. New York and Ramat-Gan in Israel were the places in which he spent the last decade of his life until his death in 1959.

Shneour's wanderings were part of the general wave of Jewish emigration from the Russian Empire to the cultural capitals of central and western Europe. He 'broke' the triangle marking the regions of Jewish religious and literary authority in Europe—Vilnius in the north, Odessa in the south, and Warsaw in the west—when, in 1906, he undertook his first true immigration to Bern and Geneva.<sup>13</sup> However, this departure from the Russian Empire and, more importantly, from the grip of the religious and aesthetic conventions of eastern European Jewish communities was not the last of Shneour's relocations. Although it could be explained by the threat of being recruited into the Russian army and by his aspiration to study medicine in Paris, Shneour's restless mobility is not only a biographical issue: it also entered his literary work and became one of its central themes.

Shneour's collected work produces a particularly intriguing map, including his native town of Shklov, which is described in his serialized Yiddish novels. He also dedicated several works to the description of Vilnius, as in his Hebrew poem *Vilna*

<sup>11</sup> Zalman Shneour, *Vilna: Poem*, Berlin 1923.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Zweig and Hermann Struck, *Das ostjüdische Antlitz. Mit fünfzig Steinzeichnungen*, Berlin 1920.

<sup>13</sup> Shneour defined this trip as his "first journey abroad" in an undated letter to Levin Kipnis. The tape-recorded copy of this letter is stored in Tel Aviv, Gnazim Archive (GA), Zalman Shneour, file no. 0794.

and in the second part of his Yiddish novel *Kesar und Rebbe* (The Emperor and the Rabbi). His work furthermore contains poetic representations of urban life inspired by his years in Paris and Berlin alongside epic descriptions of the wild Polish forest, the mythic Sahara desert, and the biblical land of Judea. These regions demarcate a series of clashing identities—between modern and traditional, between Jewish and non-Jewish, and between the Hasidic movement and its opponents, mapping traditional Jewish life from the great Hasidic genealogies to the tastes of Jewish cuisine. They engage with modern civil identity and its urban spaces, and they are ideologically invested in modern nationalism by being explicitly occupied with questions of alienation.

But does this work amount to a comprehensive project? What main direction does Shneour's map represent? Is it a "creative re-appropriation of Jewish folk sources" as David Roskies proposes in his discussion of popular Jewish literature?<sup>14</sup> Or is it better seen as a revolutionary renewal vis-à-vis traditional Jewish-European communities? Borrowing from Mikhail Krutikov's discussion of paradigms of representation, should we situate Shneour's work as closer to the paradigm of a romantic-sentimentalist representation of the old Jewish world and its certainties, or should we, on the basis of the modernist inspiration evinced by his earlier poems and of the Zionist convictions of his later works, rather regard it as a future-oriented representation?<sup>15</sup>

If Shneour's writing throughout the five decades of his bilingual expression poses one key question, it is regarding the representation of the old Jewish world. This central preoccupation is manifest in two chosen sites represented in his literary work: the city of Vilnius, where he lived from 1904 to 1906, and Shklov, his native town. Both sites are profoundly marked by the modern revolutions in the Jewish world, and mainly by what David Fishman calls in his book on the Jews of Shklov "the great divide" between *hasidim* and *mitnagdim*.<sup>16</sup> These are also the sites expressing the turning point in Shneour's poetics of representation. It was through his extensive descriptions of them in his work that he formulated his changing views on the old Jewish world.

In Shneour's descriptions of Vilnius, and in particular in his poem *Vilna*, this historical intersection is extensively developed. As Valentina Brio argues in her detailed analysis of the poem, "For Shneour, the Jewish Vilna means the complexity and inconsistency of the Jewish fate itself."<sup>17</sup> A similar argument is posed by Avraham Novershtern in his study of the image of Vilnius in Yiddish poetry during the interwar period. As he points out, of the three main prewar Jewish literary centres in eastern Europe, Odessa, Łódź, and Warsaw, Vilnius was the only city

<sup>14</sup> David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, Cambridge, MA 1995, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Mikhail Krutikov, *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity 1905–1914*, Stanford, CA 2011, pp. 121–122.

<sup>16</sup> David E. Fishman, *Russian First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov*, New York–London 1995. See in particular pp. 11–15.

<sup>17</sup> Valentina Brio, "The Space of the Jewish Town in Zalman Shneour's Poem *Vilna*", in Jurgita Šiaučūnaitė-Verbickienė and Larisa Lempertienė (eds), *Jewish Space in Central and Eastern Europe: Day-To-Day-History*, Newcastle 2007, p. 259.

that presented a rich historical sequence of Jewish existence as well as revitalizing cultural activity. Shneour's *Vilna* is, according to Novershtern, the first important modern literary description of the city, reflecting its role in the synthesis of old and new Jewish existence in eastern Europe.<sup>18</sup>

As for Shklov, Shneour's native town, the true extent of its presence in his literary work far exceeds the two serialized novels in whose titles its name occurs: *Shklover Yidden* and *Shklover Kinder* (The Children of Shklov). Shklov forms the virtual epicentre of all his late Yiddish prose and dominates his entire fictional output after the First World War. Although Shneour published a first and incomplete version of *Shklover Yidden* as early as 1913, it was only after the war that he fully elaborated the representation of this focal site.<sup>19</sup> While it is latently present even in his earliest writings, Shklov's late emergence as the core theme of his work represents an about-turn in his paradigm of representation.

This moment is not easily detected, although it involves a series of poetic, linguistic, and economic shifts which redefined Shneour's position from Hebrew poet to renowned Yiddish author, and changed his reception in the contemporary Jewish literary field. In explaining this turn, Dan Miron focuses on the role played by the evoked memory of Shklov in Shneour's late work. He considers Shneour's acquaintance with Abe Cahan, the editor of the Yiddish daily *Forverts* in the mid-1920s, to be what encouraged the former's move to popular Yiddish writing and initiated his introduction to the Jewish-American reading public.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the key position occupied by Abe Cahan in directing Shneour's late work, and the significant exposure to a Jewish-American readership during the late 1920s, I believe that the turning point in Shneour's poetic conceptions was initiated by his earlier exposure to the work of German-Jewish authors and artists in the aftermath of the First World War. The decisive moment, I contend, precedes Shneour's first visit to New York in 1919 and his later engagement with Abe Cahan's newspaper. More than to a Yiddish-American readership, it profoundly relates to a European-Jewish readership and more specifically to the figure of the *Ostjude* as perceived by German-Jewish writers in Berlin, where Shneour had lived during and after the war.

<sup>18</sup> Avraham Novershtern, 'Shir Halel Shir Kina: Dimuya shel Vilna be'shirat Yiddish bein shtei Milhamot Olam' [Ode, elegy: Vilna's image in Yiddish poetry in the interwar period], in David Assaf et al. (eds), *MeVilna Lyrushalaym* [From Vilna to Jerusalem: Studies in the history and culture of eastern European Jews], Jerusalem 2002, pp. 486–487. See also Avidov Lipsker's discussion of Shneour's *Vilna* in Avidov Lipsker, *Shirat Yitzhak Ogen: Ecologia shel Sifrut bi-Shnpt ha-Shloshim ve-ha-Arbaym be-Eretz Yisrael* [The Poetry of Yitzhak Ogen: Literary ecosystem in Eretz Yisrael 1930–1940] [Hebrew], Ramat-Gan, 2006, pp. 166–176.

<sup>19</sup> The earlier stories, which would later become part of the serialized novel *Shklover Yidden*, first appeared in the Yiddish newspaper *Der Moment* in Warsaw in May 1913.

<sup>20</sup> Dan Miron, 'Bein shney batim: al *Anshey Shklov* le-Zalman Shneour' [Between two houses: on Z. Shneour and "The Jews of Shklov"], in Zalman Shneour, *Anshey Shklov* [The Jews of Shklov] [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1999, pp. 324–339. A detailed description of the relation between Cahan and Shneour is described by Shneour himself in an autobiographical article which was published in *Forverts* under the title 'מייַן באַקאַנטשאַפֿט מיט אַב. קאַהאַן' [My acquaintance with Abe Cahan], 7 June 1942, p. 18.

It was only while staying in Berlin, in that desired destination for a young Russian-Jewish immigrant, that Shneour fully turned his attention to his old homeland. The key work expressing his changed perspective is not the Yiddish serialized novels of Shklov, published in Abe Cahan's journal, but the earlier Hebrew poem *Vilna*, written in Berlin during the war. *Vilna* was Shneour's first major work explicitly reflecting a poetics of distance, permitting him to engage with a new paradigm of representation, according to which certainties regarding provenance, origin, and nation became established only as linguistic expression, and were liberated from any existing realist reference.

Shneour's period in Berlin started with his arrival in the city in the summer of 1914. It ended with his departure for Copenhagen in 1919, followed by his first visit to New York.<sup>21</sup> Arriving in Berlin as a Russian citizen, he was arrested in August 1914 and taken to Spandau prison. He was released after a short while and spent the next four years in Berlin as a foreign citizen, in relative isolation from his extensive network of family and friends, unable to pursue his correspondence, and excluded from the activities of the Russian-Jewish literary world.<sup>22</sup> "During the days of my captivity", he wrote in a letter to the author S. Ben-Zion, "I wrote a lot. About a hundred and twenty sheets: novels, dramas and poems, poems, poems."<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note, however, that despite the central signification of Berlin in his evolution as a writer, and although his contribution to Jewish literature's brief renaissance after the First World War was considerable, Shneour is hardly mentioned in studies of Jewish literature in Weimar Berlin.<sup>24</sup> The main document

<sup>21</sup> The chain of events leading to Shneour's first visit to New York, including notably his meeting with Avraham Yoseph Shtible, the benefactor of Hebrew literature after World War I, is described in Amichai-Malkin Danya, *Ahavat Ish: Avraham Yoseph Shtible* [The love of Ish: Avraham Yoseph Shtible] [Hebrew], Jerusalem 2000. Shneour's disappointment with Shtible, following a dispute which is widely documented in Shneour's personal correspondence, can be gauged from his negotiations with Abe Cahan several years later, where it can still be found to resonate. This clearly influenced Shneour's decision to engage with Yiddish writing instead of continuing his main focus on Hebrew writing.

<sup>22</sup> This description is based on Shneour's own words in his book *David Frishman va-aherim*, p. 42. It also relies on Shneour's correspondence from the years 1918 to 1921: a letter to Yizak Neiditz from 16 January 1921 (GA Zalman Shneour, file no. 0793); two letters to Bialik from 26 October 1918 and from 3 April 1918 (Tel Aviv, Beit-Bialik Archive [B-BA] 'Correspondence' file); a letter to Yoseph Klausner from 27 October 1920 (Jerusalem, National Library Archive, Yosef Klozner, ARC. 4 1086); a letter to S. Ben-Zion from 16 January 1919 (GA, Zalman Shneour, file no. 0793); and a letter to Ya'akov Fichman from 25 December 1919 (GA, Zalman Shneour, file no. 0793).

<sup>23</sup> "במשך ימי שבי [...] כתבתי הרבה מאוד. כמאה ועשרים גליונות דפוס. רומנים, דרמות (בחרוזים) ושירים, שירים, שירים..."

From a letter sent to S. Ben-Zion on 16 January 1919, GA, Zalman Shneour, file no. 0793.

<sup>24</sup> See, for instance, Michael Brenner's only mention of Shneour in the context of the celebration of Bialik's fiftieth birthday in Berlin, in *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*, New Haven–London 1996, p. 199. In the various discussions on interwar Berlin as a Jewish cultural centre, Shneour's name is not mentioned among the influential authors and writers operating during that time. See Shachar Pinsker, 'Berlin: Between the Scheunenviertel and the Romanisches Café', in *Literary Passport*, pp. 105–143; Tamara Or, 'Ki Mi-Berlin Teze Torah: Concepts of Hebrew Diaspora in the 1920s', in *Trumah*, 21 (2011), pp. 29–40; Tobias Metzler, *Tales of Three Cities: Urban Jewish Cultures in London, Berlin, and Paris (c. 1880–1940)*, Wiesbaden 2014; Gennady Estraiikh, 'Wilna on the Spree: Yiddish in Weimar Berlin', in *Aschkenas. Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur der Juden*, 16, no. 1 (2006), pp. 103–127.

that testifies to his active participation in the Berlin Jewish literary scene is his third cycle of collected works, which was published by Ha'sefer in 1923. The second volume in this collection, entitled *Hezyonot* (Visions), brings together poems written between 1912 and 1921.<sup>25</sup>

A minor but perhaps the most significant section in the volume *Hezyonot* is a short cycle of folk songs from 1915. The poems included in this section show a change in Shneour's attitude to the distance he had put between himself and his home town. Instead of reflecting on emigration as a route leading away from the old homeland to new destinations, a path consciously chosen as a mode of revolt, Shneour now became more invested in bridging the distance and revisiting his native landscape.

In one of these poems, entitled 'Al Em Ha'derech' (In the middle of the path), Shneour first describes the physical gesture that was to become a central and productive metaphor in his work: "A Jew wanders carrying his stick and bag and turns around to look back":<sup>26</sup> This is, in fact, a version of a well-known folk song included in the 1901 anthology of Yiddish folk songs in Russia edited by Shaul Ginzburg and Pesach Marek.<sup>27</sup> The poem, describing the wish to leave the diaspora, is mostly identified with the religious and national aspirations related to *hibat zion*. As Dov Sadan has noted, Shneour shifts from the familiar version which appears in the anthology by adding the gesture of looking back towards the old deserted homeland.<sup>28</sup> By introducing this gesture, Shneour emphasizes a no less important preoccupation, which was at best only implied in the familiar version: the memory of the lost, distant homeland. This preoccupation was about to become essential in his future work.

It was due to a change in circumstances that Shneour turned his gaze to the past: with the outbreak of the war and in its aftermath, he could no longer return to Russia and visit his parents' home. In his first letter to Odessa sent after the war, he enquires: "Could you possibly let me know if the city of Mohyliv (the region) and the town of Shklov are still in Ashkenazi hands, for this is where my parents are [and] there is no way of getting any information about them for now".<sup>29</sup> A few years later, in 1921, by which time the outcomes of the war, including the death of

<sup>25</sup> Zalman Shneour, *Hezyonot* [Visions] 1912–1921, Berlin 1923.

<sup>26</sup> "על אם הדרך עומד עץ", עומד הוא קדורנית-; הולך יהודי במקל ותרמיל/ ומציץ אחרנית". Shneour, *Hezyonot*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>27</sup> S. M. Ginzburg and P. S. Marek, *Yiddish Folksongs in Russia* (photo-reproduction of the 1901 St. Petersburg edition), edited and annotated by Dov Noy, Ramat-Gan 1991, poem number 14.

<sup>28</sup> Dov Sadan, *Be'tzetkha vu'Veoalekha: Minyan Hikrey Sifrut*, Jerusalem 1966, p. 82. Shneour rewrote the familiar verse by replacing the watering eyes of the wandering Jew with the act of looking back to the deserted home.

Ginzburg and Marc's version:

"אין מיטן וועג שטייט אַ בוים/ און האָט זיך איינגעבוּיגן;/ פֿאַרְט אַיין ייד קיין ארץ ישראל/ מיט פֿאַרוויינטע אַיגן"

Shneour's Hebrew version:

"על אם הדרך עומד עץ./ עומד הוא קדורנית-; הולך יהודי במקל ותרמיל/ ומציץ אחרנית." "התוכלו להודיענו ואם ידוע לכם הנמצאה העיר מוהילב (הפלך) והעירה שקלוב בידי האשכנזים, כי שם הורי, אין שום אפשרות לקבל ידיעות לע"ע."

A letter from Shneour to Bialik, 3 April 1918, B-BA, 'Correspondence' file.

his two brothers, had become clear, Shneour writes about his forced isolation from his native environment:

The sustaining hope of returning to a renewed Russia, carrying the laurels of the poet and the sufferer, all of whose granaries are filled with the honey of song, [this hope] has also proved empty and gone up in smoke. . . . Bolshevism has smashed big, bleeding Russia to pieces and along with it our lives and those of the Russians. There's no hope left of any respite or of regaining strength.<sup>30</sup>

Until the outbreak of the First World War, Shneour regularly visited his native town; his last visit took place in May 1914. It was only in Berlin, as a result of the documented encounter between assimilated German Jews and traditionalist eastern European Jewry, that he was exposed to the possibility of a new aesthetic engagement with his old homeland.

The first major elaboration of this symbolic gesture of looking back is to be found in *Vilna*. When it was first published as a book in his 1923 collection, Shneour added to the poem ten illustrations by the German-Jewish artist Hermann Struck, who was based in Lithuania as an officer in the German army. Thereby he encouraged the reading of the poem in the context of German representations of eastern Jewry in the aftermath of World War I. Moreover, the 1923 edition of the poem manifestly corresponds with Arnold Zweig's description of Jewish Lithuania in his collaborated work with Struck entitled *Das ostjüdische Antlitz*. Struck's illustrations in the 1923 edition of *Vilna* also appeared in *Das ostjüdische Antlitz*, published in Berlin only a few years earlier, in 1920.

Unlike the assimilated German-Jewish soldiers such as Arnold Zweig and Hermann Struck whose military service took them to Lithuania, Shneour was not a stranger to eastern European Jewry. Given his deep roots in the literary national revival of eastern European Jewry, he cannot easily be included in what Aschheim describes as the romantic cult of the *Ostjuden*. Yet although he was a Jewish-Russian immigrant in Berlin, and therefore an eastern European Jew himself, Shneour was nevertheless influenced by German-Jewish neo-romantic descriptions of eastern European Jewry, as the illustrated volume of his poem *Vilna* testifies.

### 'VILNA ON THE SPREE'<sup>31</sup>

The special edition of the poem *Vilna* was the main editorial achievement of Shneour's collected works published in Berlin in 1923. This poem, comprising 310

<sup>30</sup> "התקווה המעודדה לשוב לרוסיה המחודשה בור נצחון של סובל ושל יוצר, שכל אסמיו נמלאו בינתיים דבש של שירה, אף היא פסה ונדפה כעשן.. הבולשוויים פצפץ את כל רוסיה הגדולה הפצועה העייפה למוות, ואיתה יחד את כל החיים התרבותיים שלנו ושל הרוסים, שום תקווה לנוח ולהחליף כוח לא נשקפה עוד."

A letter from Shneour to Isaac Neiditz, 16 January 1921, GA, Zalman Shneour, file no. 0793.

<sup>31</sup> This is a reference to Gennady Estraiikh's article dealing with Yiddish culture in Weimar Berlin (see footnote 24). Here, I refer to Shneour's Hebrew *Vilna*, published in Berlin.



verses in six parts, was written in Berlin in 1917 and first published in New York in 1919, in the Hebrew periodical *Miklat*.<sup>32</sup>

Shneour's *Vilna* impressively demonstrates what a powerful synthesis modern Jewish life could offer. Its opening part includes a description of two portraits displayed at the doorpost of every Jewish house in Vilna, like a modern *mezuzah*: the portrait of the Gaon of Vilna and that of Moses Montefiore. The proximity of the sacred Jewish study to the Zionist interpretation of modern nationalism is also borne out by the poem's description of the Romm publishing house, which was mostly known for its edition of the Talmud, but also for its part in printing an important selection of modern Jewish literature. As Brio argues, Vilnius is presented as "a city that preserves its traditions."<sup>33</sup> Both Brio and Novershtern refer to the detailed descriptions of the city in the poem. Novershtern explains how the mention of specific sites and figures is meant to create a sense of historical depth and mark a meaningful relation between the traditional and modern Jewish worlds.<sup>34</sup> And indeed, among the historical references in the poem are some of the main figures in the history of Vilnius, from the Vilna Gaon to Napoleon, the Hebrew maskilic poet Mikha Yosef Levenson, and the Zionist benefactor Moses Montefiore. Shneour's *Vilna* is also characterized by his reference to historical Jewish and non-Jewish sites, such as the Romm publishing house, the Strashun library, the synagogue court, the city gate, the Castle Hill and its surroundings.

However, while Brio's analysis of the poem refers to these as "historical chronotops"<sup>35</sup> and Novershtern deals with Shneour's representation of "the real topography"<sup>36</sup> of the city, I suggest reading the poem in the wider context of Shneour's choices of representation at the particular historical moment of World War I and its aftermath. In this respect, the present study differs from the two recently published articles on *Vilna* mentioned above: Brio's article, which is entirely dedicated to the poem, and Novershtern's article on the representation of Vilnius in the interwar period. Brio's final note is in fact the starting point of my reading: "The events of the beginning of the century, of World War I", she writes at the conclusion of her article, "drew the poet's attention to this city, situated at the crossroads of both Europe and the Jewish history".<sup>37</sup>

The historical context that led Shneour to focus his attention on the old Jewish world is conveyed in the sixth and final part of the 1923 edition of *Vilna*.<sup>38</sup> This part refers to two distinct historical events. Written in the first person singular, the

<sup>32</sup> Zalman Shneour, 'Vilna', in *Miklat*, 1 (1919), pp. 1–14. Shneour's poem opened the first volume of the periodical. Its title was accompanied by an illustration depicting the city of Vilna signed by Hermann Struck. This publication was part of the short-lived cooperation between the publisher Avraham Yoseph Shtible and Zalman Shneour.

<sup>33</sup> Brio, p. 253.

<sup>34</sup> Novershtern, pp. 489–490.

<sup>35</sup> Brio, p. 254.

<sup>36</sup> Novershtern, p. 507.

<sup>37</sup> Brio, p. 260.

<sup>38</sup> There exists a supplementary ending to this poem, entitled 'Le'achar Hatzi Yovel' (After twenty-five years). It was added to *Vilna* as an independent poem in Shneour's collected works published in the 1950s. See Zalman Shneour, *Shirim* [Poems] [Hebrew], vol. II, Tel Aviv 1958, p. 371.

poem could be read as an autobiographical sequence referring to Shneour's 1905 stay in Vilnius. This sequence is interrupted by a description of violent events threatening Jewish life in the city, including the various effects of war such as fire, battle, fear of death, foreign armies, and refugees. While living in Vilnius, Shneour witnessed the violent outbreak of the 1905 Russian revolution. This experience was reproduced a couple of years later in some of his bilingual short stories collected in the volume *Min Hachaim vehamaveth* (From life and death).<sup>39</sup>

The poem *Vilna* was written almost a decade later in Berlin, when the German army had reached Lithuania and the city experienced an influx of eastern European refugees from the war zones. Given the two distinct perspectives of Shneour's representation of eastern European Jewry, namely that of his early stay in Vilnius and that of his late encounter with eastern European refugees in Berlin, the historical event to which part six of the poem refers seems uncertain. To add to the confusion, this part is in the present tense and the war sequence opens with the deictic adverb "now" (*ata*).<sup>40</sup> The reference seems double and layered here: it points both to Shneour's memories of 1905 and to the current events of the First World War. This double reference is a reminder of his actual absence from the represented site. Following *Vilna*, this absence would become a crucial element in his literary output, which would mainly focus on geographically and historically distant objects of representation.

Distance is negotiated differently in Hermann Struck's illustrations, which were added to the 1923 edition of *Vilna*.<sup>41</sup> Struck's *Skizzen aus Litauen, Weissrussland und Kurland*,<sup>42</sup> from which the illustrations for *Vilna* were taken, is probably the most famous series he produced. This is chiefly because it suggests an accessible reflection of the complex encounter of German Jews with Russian Jewry during the war, and perhaps also because it eventually became associated with Struck's Zionist convictions.

This series of lithographs was created while Struck served as a German officer in Lithuania, and it expresses a neo-romantic search for visual contiguities between faces and landscapes, between physiognomy and the conditions of life. However, in his general corpus of work it does not seem to stand out as being exceptionally distinguished, and should rather be considered part of his wide-ranging contemplation of foreign faces and landscapes. Just as in his lithographs of Lithuania, Struck's works from his travels to America, Italy, Egypt, and Palestine

<sup>39</sup> Zalman Shneour, *Min Hachaim vehamaveth: Reshimot vesipurim 1903–1905* [From life and death: Notes and stories 1903–1905] [Hebrew], Warsaw 1910.

<sup>40</sup> Shneour, 'Vilna', in *Shirim*, vol. II, p. 368.

<sup>41</sup> In fact, Shneour's *Vilna* is only one publication of a series of books combining literary text with Struck's illustrations produced in Weimar Berlin. While the object of description moves from eastern Europe to America, Italy, Florence, Palestine, and Egypt, the neo-romantic perspective, the search for thematic consistency between faces and landscapes, persists. For a thorough presentation of Struck's books, which puts *Vilna* in context, see Ruthi Ofek, 'Die Bücher Hermann Strucks', in Ruthi Ofek and Chana Schütz (eds), *Hermann Struck 1876–1944* [bilingual edition Hebrew and German], Tefen–Berlin 2007, pp. 197–245.

<sup>42</sup> Hermann Struck und Herbert Eulenberg, *Skizzen aus Litauen, Weissrussland und Kurland*, Berlin, 1916.

all share the observer's same detachment from the object of representation. In the case of his lithographs of Russian Jews, Struck exchanged the perspective of a traveller for that of a military officer.

Struck's lithographs tend to remain rather distinct from the text they illustrate.<sup>43</sup> Shneour's *Vilna*, by contrast, is not described by an outside observer but by a native. His writing does not result from studied contemplation but issues from an evoked memory; it renders recognition of the familiar and the national community rather than a visual inquiry into physiological and architectural idiosyncrasies. Hence the real value of the 1923 *Vilna* edition, bringing together as it does two distinct and even contradictory projects, is that it attests to how the German-Jewish perspective affected Shneour's work.

One cannot ignore the aesthetic pathway leading back from Shneour's *Vilna* to Arnold Zweig and Hermann Struck's *Das ostjüdische Antlitz*, published in Berlin three years earlier, in 1920. The illustrations in Shneour's *Vilna* are part of the thirty which previously accompanied Zweig's text, but unlike in the former there is an intended correlation between the textual and the visual in Zweig and Struck's book. The two artists signed a joint preface to the book, in which they present their project as an introduction to Jewish Lithuania for a German readership. Their perspective was first of all influenced by the evident fact of their not belonging to the local population, as they wrote: "We spoke with our brothers and sisters while still dressed in the uniform of German soldiers".<sup>44</sup> In their capacity as German soldiers, they manifestly adopted the position of observers ("zu sehen versuchte").<sup>45</sup>

Reproducing Struck's lithographs and generally situating his work in the German-Jewish perspective on the old eastern European Jewish world, Shneour occupies a complex position. His enforced stay in Berlin created a dual perspective whereby he, a bilingual Yiddish-Hebrew author identified with the eastern European Jewish experience, finds himself observing the East from the West.

In *Das ostjüdische Antlitz*, Shneour himself actually makes an appearance as part of eastern European Jewish culture. He is mentioned together with Bialik in Zweig's description of the contiguity between the sacred book and the national literature in the old Jewish world:

For him [namely the eastern European Jew] the world regulates itself in the book: that which has been adopted from it in books, that alone is worthwhile and important; all other manifestations come second to books. And that is why he is so grateful and happy when his native environment and people like him are brought into being in books and are considered worthy of representation. [...] Because of this attitude, the Hebrew

<sup>43</sup> It is remarkable to note that in Yoseph Klausner's analysis of the poem *Vilna*, he relates to Struck's illustrations as if they were prepared for Shneour's work while he ignores, perhaps deliberately, their appearance, a few years earlier, in a previously published work on Vilnius: Arnold Zweig's *Das ostjüdische Antlitz*.

<sup>44</sup> Arnold Zweig, *The Face of East European Jewry with Fifty-Two Drawings by Hermann Struck*, ed. and transl. by Noah Isenberg, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2004, p. xxxi. In the original German text: "Wir sprachen mit unseren Brüdern und Schwestern, noch im Rocke des deutschen Soldaten", Zweig and Struck, *Das ostjüdische Antlitz*, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Zweig and Struck, *Das ostjüdische Antlitz*, p. 9.

poet and the Yiddish poet alike are shown splendor and love that only simple people are capable of giving to their artists. Bialik's or Schneur's prestige among Eastern Jewry is incomparable to that of the more abstract, less consistent, ineffectively admired, or quite simply famous German poets of the same order.<sup>46</sup>

By 1920, the year Struck and Zweig's book appeared, Shneour had already spent more than a decade living in European cultural capitals such as Paris and Berlin. His Hebrew and Yiddish writings from that time are dedicated to the description of the modern agent of transformation in the old Jewish world. This agent is, just like Shneour himself, the uprooted intellectual wanderer. It was only with the publication of the poem *Vilna* that Shneour fully turned his attention from the question of emigration to a nostalgic reconstruction of the old world.

Shneour's early works contain descriptions of either the existing or wished-for distance from his native provenance and ancient national origins, as in his 1906 short Yiddish story entitled 'Nekome' (Revenge): "I'm now a young wanderer. Until the age of fourteen I stayed in my small town, drowning in mud, and in green, and in a sad silence, while I dreamt of the big cities".<sup>47</sup> Clearly influenced by the Hebrew author and editor Ben-Avigdor's interpretation of social realism and by Leonid Andreyev's short novels, Shneour's early bilingual prose interprets distance in terms of alienation.<sup>48</sup> His early Hebrew poetry, using neo-romantic terminology, presents a similar concern with the departure from authentic origins. But for Shneour, in marked difference from Zweig's perspective, this authenticity was not to be found in eastern European Jewry, but in spite of it, beyond its conservative, old-fashioned way of life. In poems such as 'Beharim' (In the Mountains) (1907) and 'Takhath Shemesh' (Under the Sun) (1909), Shneour declares himself a descendant of Asia, "the great-grandson of hooligans and prophets" who is doomed to live in the decaying Jewish environment of eastern Europe.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, it was only long after the turning point of World War I that Zweig's understanding of Shneour as an author dedicated to the description of the common eastern European Jewry would prove to be correct. It was in the novel *Am Ha'aratzim* (The Simple People) that the common Jews would feature in Shneour's work.<sup>50</sup> This serialized novel conveys the core notion of Shneour's postwar mode of

<sup>46</sup> Zweig, *The Face of East European Jewry*, p. 37. (In the original German text, p. 35).

<sup>47</sup> "יעצט בין איך א בחור א גע-ונד'ניק. נאר ביז א יאר פירצען בין איך מיר געזעסן אין מיין קליין שטעטל וועלכע איז פארזונקן אין בלאטע, און אין גרינס, און אין טרויעריקע שטילקייט און געהלומט און גרויסע-גרויסע שטעט". Zalman Shneour, 'Mein erste dire' [My first apartment] [Yiddish], in Zalman Shneour, *Gezamelte Shriften I* [Collected Works I] [Yiddish], Warsaw 1911, p. 54.

<sup>48</sup> Andreyev's influence on Shneour's early prose was already noted by Ba'al-Machshoves (Izidor Elyashiv) in his essay on Shneour's first collection of short stories in Yiddish. See Ba'al-Machshoves, 'Im shkyat ha'hama: Shirim' [At sunset: Poems] [November 1906], in Ba'al-Machshoves, *Geklibene Shriften I* [Collected Writings I], Warsaw 1906, p. 189.

<sup>49</sup> 'Beharim' [In the Mountains]; 'Takhath Shemesh' [Under the Sun], in Shneour, *Shirim*, vol. II, pp. 32–99; 120–132.

<sup>50</sup> It was first published in 1929 in the Yiddish journal *Der Moment* under the title 'עמי הארצים': 'הומוריסטישע דערציילונגן פון דער אלטער היים' (The simple people: Comic stories from home). It also became the title of a series of prose writings, which was later incorporated into the novel *Noey Pandre*.

representation. It presents a portrait of small Jewish merchants discriminated against by their brethren, the financial and intellectual elites. The butcher and coachman Noey Pandre, the protagonist of *Am Ha'aratzim*, confronts Shneour's prewar protagonist of the *Ausländer* (foreigner) by criticizing both the traditional and the modern Jewish elites, and by claiming the national identity for the common people.

In his late serialized Yiddish novels such as notably *Am Ha'aratzim*, Shneour confronts Jewish prewar alienation and revolutionary Zionism, an ideology to which he too subscribed. His turn from an earlier preoccupation with alienation to a search for self-identification in relation to his native environment led, moreover, to the emergence of a new confidence. The opening to Shneour's best-known Yiddish serialized novel, *Shklover Yidden*, attests to this: "I know a town in White Russia on the shores of the Dnieper. Shklov is its name. I was born there and went to learn at the *heder* over there. This is how I know it that well".<sup>51</sup> While the Hebrew poem *Vilna* was written in 1917 Berlin on the basis of Shneour's remembered experiences from 1905, *Shklover Yidden* of 1929 is based on the belief in the power of the linguistic reconstruction of experienced realities.

Nothing in Shneour's evolution as a writer, from his very early works to the Hebrew poem *Vilna* and to his serialized novels in Yiddish, such as *Am Ha'aratzim* and *Shklover Yidden*, points to one single moment of change. Rather, his development includes several significant stages which reflect the quantitative relation between Shneour's work in both prose and poetry, and the contiguities between Yiddish and Hebrew in his ongoing bilingual output. These stages, however, appear to point to one essential conclusion: throughout the five decades of his literary work and his peregrinations, Shneour's writing always emerges through his engagement with geographic and symbolic provenances. This is the meaning of his poetics of distance as it first becomes manifest in his early references to his native surroundings, and as it evolves in his postwar reconstructions of these places.

As Pinsker, Tamara Or, and Gennady Estraiikh, focusing on literary circles, publishing initiatives, and educational networks in Weimar Berlin, have recently demonstrated, Berlin was an important host for modern Jewish culture in the interwar period. I contend that Berlin's importance lay in the configuration of distance it allowed the Russian-Jewish emigrants who stayed in the city at a time when it became clear that Jewish life in Russia was undergoing radical change. This configuration of distance and the encounter with the different, foreign perspective on eastern European Jewry of assimilated German-Jewish authors and artists moulded Shneour's writings, presenting him with the possibility of transforming geographical distance into a distinct poetic perspective.

<sup>51</sup> "איך קען אַ שטעטל אין ווייס רוסלאַנד אויפֿן דניעפער. שקלאָוו הייסט זי. איך בין דאָרטן געבוירן געוואָרן און אין אַ חדר געגאַנגען דערפֿאַר קען איך זי אַזוי גוט"  
Shneour, *Shklover Yidden*, p. 5.