

From the Pages of Tradition

THE DAY VILNA DIED

Yosef Friedlander

Yosef Friedlander's long and distinguished career as a journalist began in pre-World War II Vilna, where he contributed to such Yiddish publications as Vilna's צייט and לעצטע נייעס, Kovno's פאלקסבלאט, and Warsaw's אונדזער עקספרעס. In 1941 he settled in Israel. Now in his nineties, he continues to publish Yiddish and Hebrew essays both in Israel and abroad. He was present at the funeral of R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski and wrote the memoir below in Hebrew. It first appeared in print some 40 years ago in the newspaper הצופה. We have translated and annotated the original essay (S.Z.L.).¹

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It happened on Sunday, 7 Av, 5700 (August 11, 1940). Two days earlier, the Rabbi of Vilna, R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski, passed away. He was the rabbi of the entire Diaspora. Many Jewish communities knew him and accepted his authority. From all over the world, they directed inquiries to him regarding both sacred and profane matters. They sought his opinion, for his wisdom was great indeed. R. Hayyim was what they used to call "*a velt chokhem*," i.e., a person with sufficient wisdom for the whole world. He was a central figure in Jewish Europe for many years. He was not only great in Torah; he was expert in worldly matters as well. Despite his greatness, he was modest and humble, coming to the aid of every person—whatever the cause—who turned to him. He was known simply as "Reb Hayyim Ozer," without additional titles, much like the sages of Second Temple times.²

In his last years, R. Hayyim Ozer was seriously ill. Nonetheless, he continued to occupy himself with communal activity. He regularly saw visitors in his apartment, wrote many letters, and—despite his suffering—continued to address communal issues and individual needs. When World War II broke out, Vilna was captured by the Red army and handed over to Lithuania. Refugees from Poland began to stream into Vilna,

among them heads of yeshivas, rabbis, and rabbinic scholars who—like the refugees—received funding from the Joint.³ But their primary support came from R. Hayyim Ozer. His apartment on the corner of Zavalna and Great Pohulanka became the center for all mundane and spiritual activity. For years, R. Hayyim Ozer had already occupied himself with providing aid for rabbis and religious Jews in Soviet Russia. The story of his accomplishments in this unique and sensitive area remains to be written.

With the Sovietization of Vilna in June 1940, great fear overtook the refugees in Vilna. They tried to leave Soviet Russia, knowing full well that if they tarried, they would remain in the country forever. As is well known, no one could leave the Soviet Union prior to World War II. So many of the refugees returned to Poland, and to its capital city, Warsaw, in an effort to somehow survive the German occupation. There was communication in those days between the Jewish ghettos in occupied Poland and the Jewish community in Vilna. Many Jewish emissaries from the various youth movements and political parties travelled back and forth and brought news about whatever had transpired. The issue that confronted the many refugees was sharply phrased as follows: “Stalin or Hitler?” I.e., was it preferable to remain in lands under Stalin’s control, or was it preferable to return to occupied Poland, now under the aegis of Hitler? In social clubs and public kitchens established by the Joint the issue was joined and argued.

Rabbis and heads of yeshivas put the very question to R. Hayyim Ozer. He answered: “We must remain in Russia and not return to the lands occupied by Hitler.” When the rabbis and the heads of the yeshivas retorted that there is no Yiddishkeit in the Soviet Union, R. Hayyim Ozer explained: “Where there are Jews there will also be Yiddishkeit; but where there are no Jews, there will not be any Yiddishkeit.”⁴

R. Hayyim Ozer’s illness took a turn for the worse, and during the summer months of 1940 premature rumors of his death circulated several times. On Friday, 5 Av, 5700 (August 9, 1940), R. Hayyim Ozer died at the summer resort Wolokumpia on the banks of the Vilia River. His body was brought back to his apartment at 17 Zavalna Street.

During the first days of the Sovietization, Jewish life in Lithuania was dominated by Jewish communists. They published the only Jewish newspaper that was allowed to appear in print, the *Vilner Emes* (spelled: ווילנער עמעס). This replaced the *Vilner Togblatt* and the *Ovent Kuriyer*, which had reappeared in print during the brief period that Vilna was restored to independent Lithuania.⁵ The spelling adopted by the *Vilner*

Emes followed the rules of “Soviet Yiddish.” This meant that all Hebrew words had to be spelled as Yiddish words. Thus, e.g., the final forms of the Hebrew letters מנצפ"כ were disallowed. Needless to say, not even a single line was designated for coverage of the death of R. Hayyim Ozer. Nevertheless, the Jews of Vilna persisted in their efforts to publicize his death. They approached the editors of the *Vilner Emes* and indicated that they were prepared to pay for the publication of an announcement of R. Hayyim Ozer’s death. The editors agreed, so long as the deceased’s name would be spelled according to their rules: כאַיִם אויזער גראַדזענסקי. The Jews of Vilna demurred, refusing to desecrate the name of their distinguished rabbi. Instead, they made do with modest posters distributed in the name of Vilna’s Rabbinical Board which by then, in fact, no longer functioned. “The Rabbinical Board,” so the poster claimed, “offers notification of the death of R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski, who served the Vilna rabbinate for more than 50 years. All are called upon to participate in his funeral.”

Early Sunday morning, 7 Av, large crowds of Jews from Vilna and greater Lithuania began to gravitate toward the deceased’s apartment. They filled all the surrounding streets that led to the “shulhojf” (synagogue courtyard) and to the Great Synagogue.⁶ All who attended understood well that the funeral of R. Hayyim Ozer would be the first and last Jewish demonstration against Soviet rule in Lithuania, which became more entrenched every day. Everyone felt a moral obligation to participate in this massive Jewish procession, thereby expressing his solidarity with the Jewish community. Virtually no one was absent from this last procession of the Jewish community of Vilna: rabbis, yeshiva students, municipal authorities, and Kehillah officials including Dr. Jacob Wygodski, the last Rosh ha-Kahal of Vilna.⁷ All the Jewish organizations and institutions were represented; they continued to function after a fashion for they were ordered to do so by the Soviet authorities. Doctors, lawyers, workers, and craftsmen. Huge numbers of Jews came from all the suburbs. Present were members of Yivo and the Bund who were almost always in disagreement with R. Hayyim Ozer. So too secular Yiddishists and Zionists in all their different denominations.

Virtually no one was absent from the demonstration held that day. Every Jew understood deep in his soul that this was not the funeral of R. Hayyim Ozer alone. Everyone was conscious of the fact that Jewish Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania, was being led to the grave. Individual Jews would continue to live in Lithuania (no one had yet imagined the “final solution” of the Germans), but Jewish Lithuania had run its course.

The sense of bereavement, of being transformed into orphans and widows, was heightened when those present considered the glorious past of Vilna and the role it had played in Jewish history. It sufficed to consider the legacy of the recent past: the synagogues and *batei midrashim* which numbered well over one hundred; the yeshivas and Talmud Torahs; the network of Hebrew schools and Yiddish schools; the high schools and teachers' seminaries; the Strashun Library⁸ and the An-ski Museum;⁹ the Yivo Institute; the Jewish press; the world renowned printing houses of the widow and the brothers Romm,¹⁰ Rosenkranz and Schriftsetzer,¹¹ and others; the Jewish students who attended the Stephen Batory University—they fought valiantly for the privilege to study there;¹² the Zionist movement in all its different streams and the Bund which had been founded in Vilna; and the hundreds of institutions and organizations that were active Jewishly in Vilna. Regarding Vilna, it used to be said before the War that Yiddishkeit could be drawn from its atmosphere. Nothing had to be done in order to imbibe it.

Dr. Jacob Wygodski, the prominent leader of Jewish Vilna, gave expression to these sentiments in the eulogy he delivered over R. Hayyim Ozer in the Great Synagogue. He said: "We stand today beside the coffin of our great Rabbi and bring to a close forever the glorious and rich Jewish life that once graced our city. The death of R. Hayyim Ozer signals the end of the struggles that characterized Vilna for many years: the struggle between the Gaon of Vilna and the Hasidim; between traditional Jewry and the Maskilim; between Russified Jewry and the Zionists; between Zionism and the Bund; and between the advocates of Hebrew and the advocates of Yiddish. All these struggles were manifestations of battles between Jew and Jew or Jew and non-Jew in an attempt to keep Jews and Judaism alive in Vilna. These battles are over. Now it is everyone's task to remain alive and to pray that we do not lose our "divine image" in the days ahead."

So spoke Dr. Wygodski. He could not know that at that very moment the axe was about to be wielded against the Jews of Vilna. For not far from the city the Nazis were sharpening the slaughterer's knife they were about to put to the throats of the Jews of Vilna, as part of the mass destruction of European Jewry in those fateful years of 1940-1945.

NOTES

1. On Yosef Friedlander, see B. Kagan, לעקסיקאן פון יידיש שרייבערס, New York, 1986, column 452. Cf. D. Flinker, ed., די יידישע פרעסע וואס איז געווען, Tel Aviv, 1975, pp. 276 and 282. The original Hebrew of the text translated here also appeared in Y. Rudnitzki, ed., מאספּ ווילנא, Tel Aviv, 1975, pp. 42-44. It is translated here with the permission of the author.
2. While a definitive biography of R. Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski remains a scholarly desideratum, there is what to glean from earlier biographies such as: S. Rothstein, אחיעזר, Tel Aviv, 1942; J.L. Kagan and H.B. Perlman, "Hayyim Ozer Grodzenski," in L. Jung, ed., *Jewish Leaders*, New York, 1953, pp. 435-456; Y.A. Wolf, רבותינו, Bnei Brak, 1974; A. Suraski, רבן של ישראל, Bnei Brak, 1980; and S. Finkelman, *Reb Chaim Ozer*, Brooklyn, 1987. The point of departure for any new study of R. Hayyim Ozer must be a careful investigation of his writings which now include a fourth volume of his responsa, שו"ת אחיעזר, חלק ד', Bnei Brak, 1986, and the 1133 letters and broadsides gathered together in אגרות ר' חיים עוזר, 2 vols., Bnei Brak, 2000.
3. The American Joint Distribution Committee, founded in 1914, provided relief for Jewish refugees, victims of war, and the poverty stricken. Jewish educational and religious institutions in Eastern Europe were among the beneficiaries of the Joint's philanthropic efforts.
4. For what is perhaps a different perspective on this issue, see Rabbi E. Wasserman, קובץ מאמרים, Jerusalem, 2000, vol. 1, p. 335.
5. See H. Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania*, New Haven, 2002, p. 45.
6. On the "shulhoyf" and the Great Synagogue, see H. Lunsky, מהגיטו הוילנאי, Vilna, 1921, pp. 48-70; Z. Szyk, יאר ווילנא 1000, Vilna, 1939, pp. 168-232; A. Jankeviciene, *Vilniaus Didzioji Sinagoga*, Vilnius, 1996; and the photographs in L. Ran, ירושלים דליטא, New York, 1974, vol. 1, pp. 104-109.
7. On Wygodski, who was martyred by the Nazis, see: A.Y. Goldschmidt, "דר. יעקב ויגאדסקי," in Y. Jeshurin, ed., ווילנע, New York, 1935, pp. 378-382. Cf. H. Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World*, Detroit, 1999, pp. 301-305.
8. On the Strashun Library, see H. Lunsky, "די שטראשון ביבליאטעק אין ווילנא," in Y. Jeshurin, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 273-287. Cf. the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research exhibition volume: *Mattityahu Strashun 1817-1885: Scholar, Leader, and Book Collector*, New York, 2001.
9. The An-ski Museum, founded in 1913, was the Jewish ethnographic museum of Vilna. For a description of some of its treasures (now lost), see I. Cohen, *Vilna*, Philadelphia, 1943, pp. 412-413.
10. On the Romm printing press, see S. Feigensohn, "לתולדות דפוס ראם," in יהדות ליטא, Tel Aviv, 1959, vol. 1, pp. 268-302.
11. On Rosenkranz and Schriftsetzer, see C.D. Friedberg, תולדות הדפוס העברי, בפרלניא, Antwerp, 1932, p. 89. Cf. G. Agranovskii, *Stanovlenie evreiskogo knigopechataniya v Litve*, Vilnius, 1994, pp. 62-67.
12. For the plight of the Jewish students at the University, see Y. Klausner, 1939-1881 דורות אחרונים: וילנא ירושלים ליטא, Tel Aviv, 1983, vol. 1, pp. 288-306.