Ruined Cities of the Mind

(The opening paragraph from Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Literature, *by David G. Roskies.)*

There are said to be Moroccan Jews who have kept the keys to their ancestral homes in fifteenth-century Spain and Portugal. When, in the 1950s, the exiles dispersed yet again—to France, Quebec, and Israel—these metal relics from Seville and Granada, Lisbon and Barcelona, became perhaps their most tangible link to their great Sephardic past. Such keys may not in fact exist; but even so, they intrigue as metaphors. Something like a key, for instance, must have been passed on from parents to children as part of the Jewish emigration during and after World War II. How else can I understand why the immediate but severed past exerted such an enormous claim on my loyalties? The Lithuanian city of Vilna in particular, with its unique blend of tradition and secularism, became something of a lost temple to me, a symbol of what eastern European Jewry had achieved in its eight hundred years of settlement. Though my parents had left Vilna in 1930, almost two decades before I was born, its people and places were more real to me than those of Montreal. In our family, distances were measured according to a prewar map: a shopping expedition to St. Catherine Street in Montreal, for example, was described in terms of the distance from my mother's former house on Zavalne, corner of Troke, to the Vilna train station. When I actually had occasion to walk the latter route in 1971, I knew my way instinctively, despite the new street signs—Komsomol Street, Red Army Avenue, Lenin Boulevard.

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