

Interview With Shlomo Beilis, July 1987

Conducted by Jack Kugelmass  
Please acknowledge when quoting

Transcribed by Jonathan Boyarin  
September 1987

JK: O.K. What did Heschel say --

SB: What?

JK: What did Heschel -- did Heschel speak about his family?

SB: His family. . . .

JK: Where he was born and his parents and. . . .

SB: Are you recording? I want to tell you that we never spoke about those years. Our friendship was based on [the fact that] I was the only one in Young Vilna who used to visit him in his home on Poplawes, where he lived in a single, unfurnished room in the home of a poor old man. And I used to go out with him in the unpopulated Poplawe Street, and we used to walk together to the tsop, as it was called, where the vilyeyer [15] used to fall noisily into the river from above, because there was a mill, and the water was held back so that it would turn, but that had all been in earlier times. And we used to walk together and talk. But we never asked each other about our yikhes, our ancestors and so forth. He was a person with whom I was --

I called together the people who were in Young Vilna, and there was hardly a single young person from Vilna in Young Vilna at that time. They were all people who had moved in from elsewhere. One was from Bialystok; he was a correspondent for the New York Morgen Freiheit.

A second friend of ours was also from Bialystok, and we became friendly, that was Velvke Hokhman, who was later called Wolf Younin in America -- a well-known poet. He was also a friend of mine. Once a brother of his came to visit; he looked like some big -- either a horshteppler [35] or a businessman. Then one day I received a package in the mail. I went to the post office, and picked up the package. It was an excellent, new suit, which he had bought for me in Hamburg before he embarked on the ship to travel to America. And since then, since he departed, I never heard from him again. What happened? Many years later I received a little volume of poems of his, called Poems. And I sensed that this person had not had an easy life in America. Because this person -- I described him in an article of mine about Wolf Younin, and in the most recent issue, 121, there are memoirs of his wife. She discusses Younin's contacts with me, and through me with Shimshen Kan, with whom he became very friendly.

For me -- I don't want to repeat myself, that was a brief period. I don't even remember whether their first acquaintance was through a meeting, or it was through correspondence. It seems to me they corresponded first. But one day -- and I had a disease: among my many diseases was my love of horses. Until this day I consider horses to be the most beautiful creature God created. But I didn't have a horse of my own. And I went to Shyomke Kagan, [who] was in a village where he taught children, private children. I went to visit him. His employer was a horse trader. I saw a very beautiful horse. I asked the horse trader to permit me to ride it. He smiled through his mustache, helped me to get up onto the horse bareback, and he drove it with his whip. And the horse took off, heaven and earth, across hills, valleys, streams, like a demon. Until he stopped and threw me. He threw me and kicked me in the leg. The right leg, he broke my [71] bone.

I was brought in a cart -- some forty kilometers, I was brought in a cart to Vilna, and my leg was placed in a cast. When my leg was in a cast, I wrote a letter to Velvke, telling him that I was in a cast. He answered me very briefly, "I'm coming to you on foot, and I'll sit with you until you get well and we can go out together." And he came, supposedly on foot, although to this day I don't believe that he walked 250 kilometers and arrived so fresh. But he said that he would sit next to me.

But the next morning Shimshen Kan arrived, and the two of them began running around. And they kept the reason for their running around a secret from me. Finally I pressured them, and it came out that Shimshen Kan had taken Wolf Younin -- Velvke Hokhman, he had gone with him, in fact, to Moyshe Kulbak. And he had presented his poems to him. What he said about the poems I don't know, but he was very pleased to have him been received by him. And the letter which wrote to me saying he was coming, was in words that I have remembered all my life. "Make sure that it stays sunny. I'm coming to you on foot." And I wrote [99], that whether he came on foot, I don't know, but he did come.

Whether he sat until I got better -- I know for certain that the answer is no. He began running around. And finally he admitted that they'd been to see Kulbak and he had read him his poems.

But I wanted to talk to you about Heschel. It would be very interesting to me to learn about Heschel, because what -- my acquaintance with him, what you want to know, makes no sense. Because I want to know about him and about his career. Because our acquaintance was very small, a very small episode. He arrived in Vilna, and he arrived as a student in the Realgymnasium. We used to meet with him, I assembled the people in Young Vilna, the few there were. That wasn't yet the Young Vilna people think of, but rather people who were not from Vilna and later dropped away, when almost all of Young Vilna dispersed. It wasn't until later that the members of Young Vilna came --

there was Grade, there was Avrom Sutzkever, there was, their organizer was Shmerke Katsherginsky, a man who did not write himself but was extremely active, he made connections and published them, and he made himself useful.

That's it. I've described these people, and I don't have anything to repeat. In my article about Young Vilna in the Young Vilna issue which was published in Israel, in Goldene Keyt 101, and there I described all these things about Young Vilna. That doesn't mean that in that article I exhausted what there is to say about Young Vilna; not that. But I did set down their basic traits. So everyone who needs that article has it. And I don't have the patience to repeat it.

I want to say one thing only: That Avrom Heschel fit in as well with Young Vilna as Young Vilna fit him. They were entirely different worlds. We were all from the poorer classes in Vilna. All of us had struggled. No politically party loyalty, no ideological loyalty. That was perhaps the only group, which came ten years after the first major group which was established by Broderzon in Lodz, which was called Yung Yiddish. We were in Yung Yiddish, we were Young Vilna, and we didn't propound any platforms, as was done in those times. People used to come with declarations, with entire manifestos, and so forth.

We didn't have any of that. Each one came with what he possessed. And fortunately everyone possessed something. And everyone represented himself. I have written that Young Vilna was a coincidence; if we hadn't come together, each one would have produced literature on his own, because they were true talents. We came together because Zalmen Reisen, the editor of the Tog, devoted an entire page to us as a group, in public, which was called "Young Vilna Marches Into Yiddish Literature." That is a rather comic episode. How can anyone "march into" a literature -- especially people who have no band, who don't have a trumpet, without all the paraphernalia?

But that's how it happened it was called "marching in." That was in '27. Although according to my reckoning, we marched in in '29, in '29; but in fact, we assembled ourselves in '27. And the first thing we did -- because when we came together, Young Vilna consisted primarily of poets, there was one prose writer earlier: Levin, not much, with humor, a bit of a Vilner, a sort of small-town type, provincial. Then we had a writer -- a real writer, a prose writer: Soloveitchik, Henekh Soloveitchik. He used to buy and sell cows, bulls, in order to make a living. And before that we was a night watchman in Nay-Vileika, a small town, in a baritzkene factory. But he possessed such talent for describing simple things, trivialities: how a girls get married, and they give him the dowry, they give him [184] potatos, a [185] of onions, and so forth. But that was with such richness, with such language, with such expression! And he reach with such -- but later he crossed over into Russia, and disappeared. For a certain time, he participated in the first conference of the

Yiddish Soviet writers in Moscow, he lived for a while, and then disappeared, and I don't know what became of him.

Then I remember one other [194]. And those who came along, the greater ones, they were, while such poets came along -- there was Chaim Grade, who became my closest friend. In my opinion he was a poet on a very high level. And entirely in the traditional Jewish life. I've described how I met him. I arrived at an evening of Young Vilna, with which I had had no connection for a long time, because I made my living from journalism. And a boy stepped up, heavy, with a pale face, and he began to recite his poem Yekhezkel. "[205] the victor, not the hero. The hero is the one who has fallen."

I said, "No, that is not an average person. That is prophetic poetry." And I looked him up. And that is a chapter in itself. Such poverty as his, an apartment like his, I never saw in my life, although I have seen enough poverty in Vilna. A small room, a fenced-off chamber in a smithy; dark, always with a lamp burning; and a case of books, Torah books which remained from his father, a Talmud scholar who was a night watchman, and whom he described in his book, Yo.

As I say, repeating all these things make no sense. It only makes sense if I can add something today.

JK: But I will ask the questions, but if something comes into your memory which is new, you can say. Well, Heschel didn't speak about his family.

SB: He never spoke about his family.

JK: And about Warsaw.

SB: We knew that he stemmed from a Hasidic family, a pious Hasidic family. His appearance was very interesting. He was not at all similar to us, and none of us was similar to him. Just like -- we were similar to Velvke Hokhman. But this was something entirely different. This was a person who was a ben-toyre. He had the face of a scholar, the look of a scholar, the language of a scholar, and he was quiet. But we marveled at how such a tsaddik came to write such erotic poems. It was a wonder, the erotic -- modest, with Jewish discretion -- but still erotic, in his religious poems. That made an impression on us. I brought him to have him recite his poems. And there was someone there named Halpern, who wrote very lovely prose. But he, too, crossed the border over there at a certain point, and I don't know what became of him; he disappeared. But he was a very fine, talented prose writer.

Later there came people about whom I have written enough in the piece on Young Vilna. It was all original. First, among the first there was Vogler. I've described how he and Soloveitchik used to come to me every Sabbath. And they had a friend named

Itzik the glazier. He was a brother of the writer Levin, Moyshe Levin. Everyone in the family had deformities. One brother was a teacher of German and English; he had twisted arms and legs. Itzke the glazier, who was the closest friend of Elkhonon Vogler, had deformed palms; he was an excellent wage-earner and workers, putting in windowpanes.

Vogler himself was a sign-painter. He had a room where he [272] the signs. He used to come here from the signs, that was his wandering in the world. But he had very early lost both his parents, and the orphan wept in all of his poems. It is not easy to describe him. I recounted comic episodes there. He was the closest friend of Aron Mark. Mark was, so to speak, his soul: the teacher, the guide, everything. And Aron Mark was a very busy person. He had a big wife, and he had to feed her, and he supported himself exclusively from giving lessons. He himself died at 33. He was a brother of the eventual professor Berl Mark, the director of this Institute.

Vogler was a capricious person. His silences were frightening. One day he came to me and said, "I want to invite you to Mark's home." This is all written down; this is nothing new.

JK: If it's not new, I'll --

SB: Yes, what else do you want?

JK: Did members of the Heschel family come to Vilna, did they come to Vilna to see him?

SB: What?

JK: Did the members of Heschel's family --

SB: I did not know any of them.

JK: None of them --

SB: No, no. He lived alone in Vilna. Altogether we don't know him, because that was an episode. My acquaintance with him was for a short time, between his arrival in Vilna, where he studied in the Jewish Realgymnasium for a certain time, and his migration to Germany, where he began studying in a German university. That is all. That is just an episode. He himself wrote, and you have to look up his things. There was an issue of Young Vilna in America, and there's something about him there, there's even something by him there. If you could look that up, it would be interesting. There's a little article by him in an issue of Young Vilna which was published in New York. It was published by Leyzer Ran, you know the name?

JK: You've written --

SB: What?

JK: You've written that when Heschel went into the forest, he --

SB: Yes, that yes. I've described that. We used to go walking together, and he always wore a black hat. He looked like a rabbi, a genuine rabbi. Medium height, broad shoulders, thick-set; with very deep-set, beautiful eyes. And he looked like a scholar. With him we couldn't make jokes and witticisms, and he wasn't -- he wasn't one of anshey shloymeynu, as they say, not one of our crowd. He was from another world. We had respect for him.

We brought him to an evening, so that he could read. He recited his own poems.

JK: My question has to do with his aesthetics --

SB: Heschel has to be sought not in this period when he was in Young Vilna, which was a brief period, but in that into which he grew, and where we did not accompany him. Because without that, Young Vilna isn't very interesting. Because in his life it was a very small episode.

JK: But can't you -- any other episodes, from his esthetic --

SB: His poems?

JK: No, not his poems, but his idea of the forest and God, and --

SB: Concerning that I said that it had on me, it was characteristic of him for me. Because I remember the fact. I walked with him to the Zakreta Forest. It was a hot day. He wore his hat, his rabbinical hat in his hand the whole time -- a black hat. And we went into the forest. That is an authentic fact, and it is very characteristic. When we went into the forest, I saw that he put on his hat. He put on his hat and wore it. After all, it's cooler in the forest. So he wore the hat in the forest. I asked him, "Heschel" -- we never addressed him informally, as du; we addressed everyone as du, but him we addressed as ir, that camaraderie did not grow up between us. So I asked him, "Tell me, how do you explain that the whole time you were carrying the hat in your hand, and when we entered the forest, you put the hat on and wore it. How come?"

He said, "It will be hard for you to understand. For me a forest is a holy place. And a Jew, when he walks into a holy place, he doesn't take off his hat, but rather he puts it on. And that's what I do in a forest, which for me is a holy place."

And that anecdote which I've retold is very typical of him, you could build on it. But if I knew him more than that episode, it would be another thing. You have to know him. I've read his works. He wrote primarily in German. Then he became a

professor. He developed. But I didn't know about him. We had lost all contact. I only knew that he was a professor in the theological institute in New York.

But I found Professor Sholom [?], as I told you, and I asked him. Sholem said, "That is one of the greatest Jews we have." I was said, but he must have had a basis for such a statement. And I don't have that. Because I haven't read his philosophical works in German, nor his works. And his few things that I read, I felt that this was the greatness of the members of Young Vilna. For example, among us there was for a certain time, formally, because I have invited him -- Benn. Did you ever hear of Benn? One of the greatest painters in France today. I can show him to you, because I have a small album of his, The Song of Songs, and I have a large album with photographs of Benn. [406]

Benn is somebody with whom there is nothing to say. And when one looks at his pictures, he speaks so much and he says so much. And there I recount what was not know about him. Because he began writing his major work, is the Song of Songs, and verses, [413], Psalms and verses from the Tanakh. When have you ever heard of such things in paintings? I told the world. [418] while he lived in France, he had to hide. He hid in the cellar of a French home. And he never left the cellar. He was hiding. And lying in the cellar there -- and he knew Psalms, he had memorized Psalms in his youth. He began to remember verses, while he lay in the cellar -- I consider this to be very important -- and while he was lying in the cellar he began to remember verses from the Bible -- verses from the Psalms. And he began to say, "How would it be expressed in plastic form, in paint? And that's when I began thinking about it." And that's when he began to do it, after he got out of the cellar, after the war.

It's easy to talk about that, but not everything can be told. I was very proper with him. Whether for better or for worse, I was very proper with that person. His wife conducted all his business, everything. She was hateful, not a sympathetic person. But without her there would have been no Benn, because he had no competence for anything in life. Once he said, "My wife says that I have to invited you for lunch. My wife says, my wife says --"

I aaid, "Listen, Benn. Don't tell me, 'My wife says,' but tell me what you say, what you want. I don't want to know what your wife says."

"When my wife says, she knows what she's saying." And his wife handled all his affairs. How she attracted other people, I don't know. But I couldn't stand her. Once, the last time we met in Paris, and I had been there previously, and I didn't go to see him, we always used to meet. Now, the house in which he lived in Montparnasse, he had bought and turned into a museum. He had maintained this idea for a very long time, to turn it into a

museum, with his pictures, named for his parents who were killed by the Germans in Bialystok.

I don't have to write about him, though I have something to say about him. But the greatest French critics have already written about him, the academics, and they give him a great deal of honor, including the honor of being made an honorary citizen of Paris. He has remained exactly what he was. When he used to show one of his paintings, he used to say, just like a Psalm Jew when there is a corpse nearby, [494-495], just so he used to say the verse, each picture he showed, it was the big -- he said the verse, such and such a verse [499].

Another thing with him: whether piety or not piety, but never in his life did he paint, he never did anything on the Sabbath. The holiest day in his life was the Sabbath, and he kept it. He never -- once, walking in Paris in the street, he met a certain journalist from Strasburg, who published articles in the French newspapers. He realized, "Oh, the one from Strasburg! That must be the one who attacked me. Because in the Strasburg paper in French they had written, they wanted to hide from me, a very nasty article against me. In that article I was compared to the Polish Vergelis." You know who Vergelis is. Yes?

JK: Yes.

SB: "And after the article came out, they still hid. At that time a protest letter appeared in the Frankfurter [?], in French, which was written by Charles Dobzynsky, and Professor Jankelevitch from the university. How did he dare to compare me to Vergelis? [530-532]. And they took their article, they hid it from me, but it contained viciousness -- that I was a Communist functionary. And they printed the protest by Charles Dobzynsky and Professor Jankelevitch."

That's all I did, and I didn't know about all these affairs, and he took us into a cafe, the journalist from Strasbourg. I said, "Come in, we'll sit in the cafe."

"What will my wife say? I didn't ask my wife."

I said, "Do you need to ask your wife? Come in."

He said, "Without my wife I don't go into a cafe." And so he is under his wife's [555] until the present day.

JK: About Heschel.

SB: You only want about Heschel? But Heschel, there's only what I've said already. You understand. Heschel is too great a figure. And you have to know Heschel's works. Because an author is his works. And the "great Jew" was not his poems. The poems he printed before he lived in Vilna I looked up, and I found them. A few poems. But those are nothing remarkable.



JK: He read his poems to your group.

SB: He didn't read in public. He used to recite whenn a group met, at meetings of Young Vilna. They were very fine, intellegently written poems. In the old style, in a very old style. They didn't possess, they were dead serious. They didn't possess a drop of irony. He was "dead pious," so to speak, and that was in his poems as well. But what was the raisin, the prize -- the "your body smells of froyes [?589]," and other similar things, light erotic moments. But that was the erotic, and the erotics are mostly pornographies, and it's hidden by daring, because with him it was Jewish modesty. True Jewish modesty. Such poems of his, his erotic poems, because where else do you have such literature such as Sholem Aleykhem's Stempenyu, where he's afraid even to look, he's afraid even to fail in love, becuase modesty was such an important thing for the Jewish woman. That was the most interesting, serious, and modest love in the world. Today it's all gone. 12-year-old girls used to [610] and make themselves repulsive. And that was instilled in Jewish daughters, the modesty of Jewish women. You understand? That's the issue. Today Jewish women, too, would laugh at all these stories. But the literature has given us the portrait of a Jewish woman, her state of mind. Because Sholem-Aleykhem has left more Jewish history -- lively, artistic -- than all the historians together. You understand? Because he gave us both the entire gallery of characters, and he gave us everything.

I received a letter from someone, whom I do not know at all. I don't know what to do with it. I think this is it. Where are my glasses? Not here?

The seventh of the seventh, this month.

Shalom panye. [Reads in Polish] You understand everything, no? What you don't understand, ask me. [Polish] Pan Fridman. Intermediary. He didn't know my address, but Pan Fridman. As you know -- I'll read it straight through to you in Yiddish, good?

"We are beginning to publish a series of classics of Yiddish literature, having in mind the field of erstwhile Polish republic. That will take us several years. At the same time, we have to assemble a group of competent collaborator. Therefore we are turning to you to ask you to write a postscript to Sholem-Aleykhem's From the Fair. You should not go beyond 12-14 pages of typed copy, in order to maintain the particular proportions among the various elements of the book. In the literature Nacwecje [?]" -- he means this journal -- "you printed a very fine sketch about Aleykhem. The idiocy -- he brings out viciously. We have a writer named Sholem-Aleykhem. What does 'Sholem-Aleykhem' mean? He takes out a book of his, and shows it in Polish, and there writes the greatest Polish writer we have, Jewaskewycz [?714]

[Side B]

SB: So if I had about him -- I only know that episode, you understand? Everybody asks me the same thing, they would like to know. But [4] those who know, not me. And I can't make them understand that.

JK: His love poetry. The love poetry he wrote?

SB: Of course personal. I don't know, he doesn't use any names -- it is woman in general, but I must tell you -- one moment. One second.

You'll know once and for all. Here it is. Here I talk about a certain poet who committed suicide. He was the son of a rabbi in Vilna, who went with his piksodim [?17], as far as -- and the entire city stood on the bridge and looked, and didn't know, [19]. He has been entirely forgotten. [19] of his poems. [20]. A very short piece. "Avrom came. Avrom Yehoysh, his name is. Heschel. A good-looking young man, with the deep eyes of a scholar. A person of an entirely different type than we. Pious. Very solid, and not loose in any way. Our relations with him were correct, but distant, as though there were a barrier between us. I was at his room on Poplawe Street several times; he lived there in solitude at the home of a very pious old Jew. Besides me, no one from our crowd visited me. At the meetings --" you hear everything? "he recited his poems, and participated in the discussions about others. He spoke beautifully; his words were spare and considered. His inspired respect with his bearing, I would say with his subtlety, with the silk and satin he possessed in his soul. If my memory does not deceive me, Vilna was a very brief stage in his long trek, collecting Torah and knowledge. Between the yeshivas and Berlin University, there was a short chapter of Jewish Realgymnasium and Young Vilna. Several times in the summer I walked with in the Bermont [?39] Forest, when we used to leave his room, or in the Zakreta Forest after meetings at the home of Zalmen Halpern, where he lived on Folyanke [?41]. It was surprising to me that he carried his dark hat as we walked along, and when we went into the forest he put it on. I asked him, 'What does it mean?' He answered pleasantly, 'I don't know whether you will understand me. For me a forest is a holy place, and a Jew does not go into a forest bareheaded.' I was even more surprised that his 'sinful,' erotic poems were very similar to the poem of his that had already been published in the volume Varshever Shriftn, 1926-1927, published by the literary society of the Yidish literati and journalists in Warsaw. Perhaps that was his debut as a poet? 'The skin of a woman is so purely silver/ the silken skin of a woman is so delicate/ But just so brown is the flesh of her greedy lust [?55]/ When her teeth plow the moist lips of man/ Can eyes no longer kiss wakeful lips/ Can hearts no longer flutter, flutter, nor be gladdened.' Heschel's poems seemed to me to be a bit stiff. But they possessed density, mass. Every feeling is enveloped in an idea."

That is all about him. And in fact I don't have anything more to say about him than what I've said. And people ask.

JK: One more question. His friends -- who were they?

SB: He didn't have any friends. I tell you -- he lived alone at the home of a simple Jew, a poor man. He had an iron bed there, and that was his entire [68]. He certainly wasn't a wealthy man, but he could have taken better rooms. Because for 25 zlotys, for 20 zlotys one could have had a [71] room. And he lived -- he wasn't a rich man, that's no secret. He was only wealthy in his appearance, his ideas, his manner. He wasn't our type of person at all.

If I were familiar with his -- a real autobiography, a substantial work -- I could connect what he was in the beginning to what he developed into. But I don't have that. And everything about him -- I don't have his works. I read in German what he wrote. I don't have it. I have nothing by him.