Vilna and Kiev, today the capitals of the independent republics of Lithuania and Ukraine, occupy a special place in both Russian imperial imagination and Jewish memory. Kiev, “the Mother of Russian cities,” was the capital of the medieval principality of Rus’, which provided the Russian empire with the sense of historical and religious legitimacy. Vilna was the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, one of the largest states in medieval Europe, which had close dynastic ties to Muscovy but was also its main rival. Jewish presence in Kiev can be traced back to the 10th century; whereas in Vilna, Jews settled around the 15th century. Under Russian imperial rule, the former Polish lands of Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania became part of the Pale of Jewish Settlement, territory where Jews were permitted to live. Vilna, the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” came to embody traditional yidishkayt. Although Jewish residence in Kiev was restricted due to its special significance for Russian Christianity, the city became one of the most dynamic centers of Jewish modernity in Russia by the turn of the 20th century. During the Holocaust, Nazis and their local collaborators brutally murdered the Jews of Kiev and Vilna, and the mass graves in Babi Yar and Ponar are gruesome reminders of the tragedy.

After the war, Kiev and Vilna (renamed Vilnius), capitals of the Soviet Socialist Republics of Ukraine and Lithuania, contained significant Jewish populations. Yet Jewish activity remained suppressed there, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, and existed mainly underground. By the end of the last century, assimilation and mass emigration significantly reduced the number of Jews, so that when, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a newly independent Ukraine and Lithuania again permitted and even encouraged rebuilding Jewish institutions, it was too late to bring back the old glory.
In the popular perception of American and Israeli Jews, the Holocaust eradicated Jewish life in Eastern Europe, and Communist persecution and emigration finished off what remained. Looking at Jewish life from inside, however, the picture appears more complex. Of course, knowledge of Jewish culture, Yiddish, and Hebrew was diminished by the absence of any possibility of education outside the family. Family stories, therefore, became the main repository of Jewish memory. Like all stories, they were set in particular places, such as the parents’ or grandparents’ home shtetl, the big city where family members moved after the Revolution, or the ghettos and camps where they perished or survived during the war. Old family homes, stores, workshops, prayer houses, cemeteries, or their remaining ruins all featured prominently in these stories. And whereas from America or Israel these places might look like legendary locations from a remote past, for Jews in the Soviet Union, they were ordinary places that could be visited and explored.

Indeed, the revival of Jewish life in the late 1980s generated interest in Jewish space. Young enthusiasts visited the centers of Hasidism in Ukraine, restored Holocaust memorials in Belarus, mapped the history of Jewish institutions in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and conducted guided tours of Jewish Vilnius and Kiev. For Jews, as for other peoples of the former Soviet Union, recovering repressed memories of the pre-Soviet and Soviet past became an important part of their new cultural agenda. Local and family memories made their way into literature, spurring a new wave of memorial fiction that dealt with formerly suppressed issues. Over the past 20 years, a diverse group of talented Russian Jewish writers has emerged in different parts of the world, from the former Soviet lands to Israel, North America, and Germany. This transnational phenomenon defies any straightforward categorization along geographical or national lines, or even linguistic lines: what unites them is their relationship to Russian Jewish memory.

My project focuses on this connection between space and memory in the work of two contemporary writers, Grigorii Kanovich and Inna Lesovaya, both closely associated with Vilna and Kiev, respectively. Kanovich began his career as a Russian writer in Soviet Lithuania in the 1960s. Unusually for the Soviet literature of that time, he concentrated on portraying Jewish life in the pre-war Lithuanian shtetl, his home until the age of 12. His realistic prose style is deeply metaphorical, which creates an evocative sense of lost Jewish space. Written over the course of 50 years, his novels form an epic saga of Jewish Lite, as the area of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania is still known among the Litvak Jews who trace their ancestry to Lithuania and Belarus.

As a child, Kanovich cherished a dream of Vilna as “the city of cities, a Jewish island in a stormy ocean of hate and foreignness, the image of a capital of Jewish piety and wisdom.” Situated less than 100 miles from his shtetl, Vilna loomed beyond reach because it stood on
the other side of the Lithuanian-Polish border. When Kanovich saw Vilnius for the first time after returning from Central Asia, where he was evacuated with his family during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania in 1945, the city was no longer its old self. “Everything was strange, incomprehensible, and caused fear and suspicion. My ears tried in vain to catch some sound that might link this city with the one about which I had heard so much, the one that used to appear in the dreams of my childhood.” In his work, Kanovich salvages fragments of the lost Vilna, but he refrains from recreating a wholesome image of that lost world. His Vilnius is a city of shattered dreams, unrealized expectations, missed opportunities. It is the residence of a small bunch of “forgotten Jews” who live by their memory, oblivious to the political changes around them.

By contrast, Lesovaya, born in Kiev two years after the war, started writing in the 1990s. However, like Kanovich, she is fascinated by the richness of Jewish life that once flourished in the landscapes of her Ukrainian homeland. A professional painter as well as a writer, she painstakingly reconstructs the minutiae of everyday reality, filling up the densely populated spaces of her stories with precious details.

The prose fiction of Kanovich, Lesovaya, and other contemporary Russian-Jewish authors presents a sort of counter-history that runs against both the established Soviet imperial narrative and the new emerging national ones. Their celebration of the local and the domestic, their refusal to subordinate details and fragments to a superimposed order pays tribute to the past by keeping it alive through works of their imagination. They are custodians of the Jewish memory of Vilna and Kiev who see their mission in transmitting it to the next generations.