

# TRANSLATIONS INTO AND FROM YIDDISH

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MORDECHAI LITVINE

*Editor of POETES FRANÇAIS TRADUITS EN YIDDISH,  
Paris, I-1968, II-1986*

The Eighth Annual Avrom-Nokhem Stencl Lecture in  
Yiddish Studies delivered before  
the Eighth Annual Oxford Summer Programme  
in Yiddish Language and Literature  
on 20 August 1990

Translated from Yiddish by Helen Beer

OXFORD PROGRAMME IN YIDDISH  
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*S. S. Praver's impression of  
Mordechai Litvine*

It is an honour for me to give this year's Avrom-Nokhem Stencl Lecture in memory of the poet, and I thank the organisers of the Oxford Programme for choosing me, an honour which gives rise to a mixture of emotion; regret that he is no longer with us, combined with the greatest warmth at his memory.

I met him several times, in London's Whitechapel, where I visited him in his very simple and modest room, containing a bed, a table, a chair and nothing more. I also encountered him at several meetings and conferences in Paris and Israel; and each time I met him, I felt his vibrant temperament, full of human goodness and his abiding love for Yiddish and *yidishkayt*. Once at a reception for Yiddish writers in Tel Aviv, he gave a speech (constantly illustrated with gestures) in which he said: *Got aleyh hot aropgeshikt far zayne yidn ot di zeltene matone, dos shtetale* "God himself has sent this rare gift to his people, the *shtetale!*"

Actually I was not entirely in sympathy with him on this occasion. I am not one of those who celebrate and admire the *shtetl* myth which has played and continues to play a part in Yiddish literature, and about which there are always such varied and conflicting opinions as to its greater or lesser, positive or negative effect. But one could not fail to be moved by this manner of speaking. It was certainly not pathetic; on the contrary, he spoke with a warm, charming naivety, his upheld hands seeming to caress and fondle the divine gift sent down from above... In his life, as in his poetry, he was a stranger to material concerns. Stencl shall remain in the minds of those who knew him and those who know his work as the loyal knight and inspiring troubadour of Yiddish Whitechapel.

As chance would have it, I happened to be visiting my late brother in London when Stencl's eightieth birthday was being celebrated. He was about to publish his reminiscences of Berlin in the 1920s, in

*Loshn un Lebn*. This was of particular interest to me, since I had also lived in Berlin at that time; though somewhat younger than he, I arrived there only two years later. I don't know whether Stencl completed his account of this short but important period in Yiddish life and creativity after the First World War. Those that I remember were certainly very interesting, and I hope that these memoirs will be collected and published. It would be a worthy way in which to honour his memory.

## I

The theme of today's lecture dedicated to Stencl's memory (which would greatly have interested him) is 'Translations into and from Yiddish in general, and of Poetry in particular'. As you will observe, I am stating the opposite of the usual formula, firstly *into*, then *from*. As we shall soon see, translations into Yiddish are far more numerous and more dominant. Moreover they served an important function in Yiddish cultural history.

We shall discuss the role of translations from Yiddish a little further on. But whether *into* or *from*, the question of translation (among others into and from Yiddish) is one of the most fundamental processes of Jewish spiritual endeavour in general, in its cultural, historical, and, therefore, culture shaping meaning of our being and becoming. Of course, everyone knows that translation is an absolutely necessary, indispensable part of human creativity, imperative for mankind since ancient times for overcoming the curse of Babel. The curse which may in fact be viewed as a blessing for a multifaceted, pluralistic and therefore creative ways of perception and conceptualization.

In order not to fall into the linguistic solipsism of a Wilhelm von Humboldt, one should accept Max Weinreich's formula that every language is 'a separate world containing smaller worlds', and that all

the 'smaller worlds' are in a state of constant movement and flux. From their dualistic nature, their remarkable constants on the one hand and their persistent variables on the other, the problematic nature of translation can be inferred – incalculably deeper than simple understanding. It is an encounter between two worlds, collision and penetration, pulling towards and pushing away, the result of which is an antithetic enrichment and development.

It is no surprise then, that the problems of translation acquire an ever-increasing importance in modern linguistics, especially those of skilful translation. The theoretical problems which this poses are considered today as one of the ways of studying precise aspects of artistic creation in general as a kind of bridge between the unconscious and the conscious, or between art and science.

It is a process, an activity which rises far above the utilitarian. Why do we translate? To broaden the knowledge of mankind? To present works which are not accessible to people in the original? Of course. In order to enrich our own literature? To make it familiar to others? Absolutely. But above all there is the 'for oneself and within oneself' factor. Each literature that is alive and wants to live demands translations, and inevitably assimilates its own shaping of creative works in foreign languages with that of its own. Conversely, it also strives to be translated so that its own oeuvres would gain various new linguistic and cultural transfigurations.

It is one of the factors which plays a part in determining the spiritual appearance of the world in general, a role which has continued to grow from antiquity to the present day into the dual process which characterises our present age; the ever-tightening connection and the accelerating exchange of material amongst people, while simultaneously the tendencies towards distinction and differentiation strengthen. Both trends overlap and settle antithetically. For this reason, translations occupy an ever increasing role in both.

That is how it is in general, but as it is known among Jews, every process and each activity acquires an additional dimension on ac-

count of our extraordinary history. Therefore the problem of translations into and from Yiddish must be considered within the framework of one of the most fundamental phenomena in the history of the Jewish people — its multilingualism throughout its existence, with a culture which is also multilingual and diverse, even though its substance may be uniform and undivided. This established us early on as ‘a nation of translators’ par excellence, and in part also determined the character of the process of translation among Jews. A translation which does not only make an external claim upon foreign languages and cultural spheres, but also an internal claim among different languages within the Jewish cultural sphere.

We all know the part which translations played in the development of both Graeco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian culture. We are familiar with the impact of translations from Greek literature; and in the third century BCE, when Livius Andronicus began his first translation from Greek into Latin, his prose retelling of the *Odyssey*, an immensely important translation *into* Greek was also begun — the first translation of the Bible from Hebrew into Greek, the Septuagint. This, according to one of the best known specialists in the area, Professor Kahle, was “a unique achievement; the first attempt to transfer a long text into another language”. This attempt, with its far-reaching consequences (eg for Philo’s philosophy and later for the emerging Christianity), and around which so many legends were woven, began with an internally Jewish concern. Translation first began for the benefit of the rich and influential Jewish community in Alexandria in Ptolemy’s Egypt, whose vernacular at that time was already not Hebrew, but Greek.

The Septuagint was as a matter of fact not translated into classical Greek but into the Greek dialect spoken by Jews in Alexandria. There were also the later translations of that period from Hebrew into Aramaic, such as *Targum Onkelos*, *Targum Yonathan ben Uziel* or *Targum Yerushalmi*, or still later the *Pshita* into Syriac, or even later, in the tenth century, Saadia Gaon’s translation into Arabic.



These were first and foremost made for the Jews themselves for their own use.<sup>1</sup>

The art of translation is, therefore, one of our most ancient traditions. It is conditioned by the history of our people, and it transpired in two spheres – the Jewish and the non-Jewish, in a linguistic pluralism which was always the result of three main forces. First, there was the permanence of Hebrew as a primary language, the language not only of religion, but also of a more than three thousand-year-old uninterrupted literary creativity, the language of the fundamental texts of the Jewish spirit, and in essence the language which united all Jewish testimonies in the world through succeeding generations. This was the vertical force. Secondly, the co-territorial non-Jewish languages served as horizontal forces, from whose interface with Hebrew the various other Jewish languages, including Yiddish, arose. It could be said that these languages were a kind of permanent translation, an attempt to mould a Jewish structure out of the surrounding non-Jewish environment. In this manner a spiritual web was woven each time, which helped maintain in perpetually changing surroundings one's own national essence and its continuation. From this arose also the specific and elevated function of translation, not only from or into foreign languages, but also and initially from and into Jewish languages. Understandably, the pace varied according to the laws and requirements of various times. Thus in the Second Temple period, and for centuries later, the thrust was to translate Hebrew into Aramaic, Greek and other languages. Conversely, a thousand years later there was a need to translate *into* Hebrew. And only as a consequence do we have such works as Rambam's *More Nevukhim*, Yehuda Halevi's *Sefer haKuzari*, Saadia Gaon's *haEmunot vohaDeot* and Bakhya Ibn Pakuda's *Khovot haLevavot*, written originally in Arabic, which were to play a cardinal role in Jewish spiritual life. Only through Hebrew translation did they, like so many others, become an integral and vital part of Jewish culture past and present.

The double-edged translating skill of our people achieved a special significance in the area of Yiddish. In the infancy of Yiddish literature – leaving aside oral folk literature – there were translations, literal or in paraphrase, direct or exegetical and homiletic in nature. Many a major genre of old Yiddish literature (eg the Biblical epic poems and later the Biblical plays, the various *muser* and *mayse* books and popular chronicles in prose and in rhyme) became permeated with elements of these translations. In the seventeenth century all this culminated with the two competing translations of the entire Bible by Yekusiel Blitz (Amsterdam, 1678) and Yoysef Witzzenhausen (Amsterdam, 1679; 1687) and with Yankev Ben Yitskhok Ashkenazi's masterpiece, the *Tsene rene* (= *Ze'enuh u-Re'enuh*), an extensive homiletic reworking of the entire Pentateuch and the Five Scrolls. The fourth print of the *Tsene rene* (from Hanau, 1622) is the oldest preserved edition. Generations of Jewish women, right up to our own time, read it with great pleasure and devotion on the Sabbath. An important translation of this same book into French was prepared by the young scholar of Yiddish language and literature, Jean Baumgarten and was published in 1987.

In a broader sense we can generalise that the synthesis between translations, better still transpositions, from *loshn koydesh* ('the language of holiness') on the one hand, and the borrowed as well as native Yiddish elements of worldly creativity on the other, have formed and governed the history of Yiddish literature for centuries.

## II

The primary significance of translations *into* Yiddish stands out in the place they occupy in language and literature from the nineteenth century up until the Second World War. This is the period marked by the critical historical process of modernisation of Jewish society. As a result the modern phenomenon of translations into Yiddish also assumes the more specific Jewish national forms in Eastern Europe and in the immigrant lands of the eastern European

Jews. This is in contrast to the course of the modernisation of western European Jewry. That is how it was from the earlier times. For example, the late eighteenth century Haskalah (Enlightenment), which in the west often led to assimilation, in its eastern European form became a powerful stimulus for a national renaissance. Of course there was a host of reasons for this – economic, social, political, intellectual – but Jewish literature in both Yiddish and Hebrew (and to a lesser extent in German and Russian) was an extremely important factor; a deep revelation of the transformation and its catalyst. Within this framework, translation performed an effective, first-rate task.

For those who did not experience it, it is hard to imagine the veritable avalanche of translations, not only of *belle lettres* but of all kinds of scientific, philosophical, historical, economic and political literature. At the beginning of our century it was possible to read, in Yiddish, not only Balzac and Tolstoy, Heine and Zola but also Darwin and Marx, Bockl and Kant, Rousseau and Kropotkin and many more. Some authors (eg Chekhov and Gorki) as well as Multatuli's love letters, reached readers of Yiddish before reaching English readers.

Those of my generation can remember it very well. For example, I read my first children's stories, *The Snow Maiden*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Ali Baba*, in Hebrew. My first book by a French author, *Around The World in Eighty Days* by Jules Verne, I read in Yiddish. A little later the first stories of Maupassant I read in Hebrew, but *Germinal* by Emile Zola I read in Yiddish. And here we touch upon an important point; this wave of translations captivated not only Yiddish literature but also the Hebrew literature of the same period. Crucially, there was a parallel movement in both languages. One of the most important factors in the modernisation of Jewish life and society, the absorption of world literature, reached the Jewish masses in eastern Europe and, to a large extent America, not only through the mediation of non-Jewish languages, but above all

through Yiddish and Hebrew.<sup>2</sup>

The wave of translations into Yiddish reached its climax around the First World War. At the same time there was a revival of the traditional striving to transfer and integrate not only the treasures of world literature, but also those of Jewish literature. This endeavour, formulated at the Czernowitz Conference (1908), was in a sense a return to the old Jewish tradition, but after the *Sturm und Drang* period which translations into Yiddish had undergone for half a century, there was a return to higher quality. Y. L. Peretz began to work on his poetic renditions of the Five Scrolls and several decades later, in 1941, we have Yehoash's grandiose work, a highly modern and masterly translation of the Bible into Yiddish, today still unsurpassed in quality. Yehoash (=Shloyme Bloomgarten, 1872-1927) was in his early 30s when he began to work on this translation. The translation wave does not weaken in the period between the wars, but the emphasis shifts from quantity to quality, in the selection of material and in the standard of translation itself. More space is given to poetry; there is an increase in important translations from Hebrew, such as *Sefer haAgada* by Bialik and Ravnitsky, or medieval Hebrew poetry, the Hebrew verses of the Enlightenment period, as well as Bialik's poems by Y. Y. Shvarts and others (see Khayim Nakhman Bialik, *Lider un poemen: A. Originel geshribene in yidish; B. Iberzetste fun hebreyish*, New York, 1935).

The emergence in some countries (the interbellum Poland, the Baltic states, and the Soviet Union) of a school network in Yiddish brings in its wake translations of school texts, enriching Yiddish with all kinds of terminology, and thereby also assisting in other spheres of translation.

The wave of translation into and from Yiddish which arises in Russia after the First World War constitutes a separate chapter. This was an organic consequence of the explosion of Jewish creativity after the removal of all restrictions upon Jews from the February revolution until after the October coup d'état. Here translations of

prose and poetry were more significant than political work, particularly from the new Russian fiction which spread further into Poland, the United States, Argentina and elsewhere. Predictably, the upsurge in translation in the Soviet Union shares the fate of Jewish culture in all its stages up until the complete destruction and annihilation by Stalin and his helpers of the entire Yiddish culture and its creators, including even the liquidation of the Yiddish alphabet. It is however interesting that with the first restricted and tightly supervised resurgence of Soviet Yiddish literature in the 1960s, translations from and into Yiddish again occupy a relatively important position.

### III

And what about the translations from Yiddish? Before the First World War there was not a lot going on in this field, apart from those translations from Yiddish into Hebrew (and vice versa), often by the authors themselves. Only certain works by our classical writers were translated into Russian, Polish or German. In the French language, Yiddish was a terra incognita. There was also almost nothing in English. The first book was a collection of Morris Rosenfeld's poems in a rather prosaic translation by Wiener (Rosenfeld, M., *Songs from the Ghetto*. With Prose Translation, Glossary and Introduction, by Leo Wiener, Copeland and Day: Boston, 1898).<sup>3</sup> In this respect Yiddish literature was less fortunate than its Hebrew counterpart. The situation changes between the wars, with the emergence in international literature of Sholem Asch; and the name of Sholem Aleichem begins to resound in dozens of languages. An intensification in translation develops in Russian, German and, a little later, in English; but the number of translations into Yiddish still far outweighs those from Yiddish.

After 1945 the situation becomes radically different. The number of translations into Yiddish drops dramatically, the main reason clearly being the Holocaust, which destroyed millions of Yiddish speakers and readers. Another reason is language assimilation and the

depletion of a relatively monolingual Jewish population throughout the world for whom Yiddish served as a bridge to world literature, although translations into Yiddish still continued and served the function of enabling Yiddish readers from a non-Yiddish language-base to approach the literary works from other languages.

So, too, the essential motivation had altered – there are translations into Yiddish not for utilitarian motives but rather for literary, creative interest in the act of translation itself, for example in the translation of the Finnish epic *Kalevala* by Hirsh Rosenfeld (New York, 1954). Of course this trend also existed previously, particularly in the translation of poetry. Parallel to *Kalevala* we can point to the translations of Lithuanian and Latvian folk songs by Aaron Katzenelboyn (1st ed. Toronto, 1930; 2nd ed. New York, 1936). However, from now on this movement dominates the entire sphere of translation into Yiddish. On the other hand, the above-mentioned internal Jewish stimulus is also maintained, as in the translations of the Mishna by Simkhe-Bunim Petrushka (six volumes, appeared in 1945-1949), parts of the Talmud by Yankev-Meyer Zalkind (*Berakhot* from the Babylonian Talmud, London, 1922; *Pe'ah* and *Demai* from the Jerusalem Talmud, London, 1928 and 1929) and the Midrashim by Shimshen Dunki (*Eikha Rabba*, 1956; *Esther Rabba* and *Ruth Rabba*, 1962; *Kohélet Rabba*, 1967).

At the same time there begins to be a movement of translations *from* Yiddish, and here again both trends in Jewish translation are revealed, namely those of culturally internal and external spheres, serving those sections of the population, particularly the young, who no longer master the language.

#### IV

In illustration of what has been said so far, some statistics are in order, not complete, but nonetheless revealing of the general trends. The data was gleaned from the catalogues of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem and of the YIVO Library in New

York, and complemented by the files of the Library of Congress, Washington D.C., the New York Public Library and the Medem Library in Paris. These statistics encompass *belles lettres* (ie novels, short stories, non-fiction narratives, essays, poetry and drama) and do not include any scientific, historiographic or political writings, or translations published in periodicals or of later editions of the same work.

First of all, the numbers of works translated *into* Yiddish. Up to 1975 we can find in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem 304 titles from 15 languages, as well as 25 from Hebrew. In the YIVO Library in New York: 355 titles from 11 languages in addition to 32 translated from Hebrew. Of particular interest is the classification into periods and genres in the YIVO Library:

	PROSE	POETRY
Up to 1918	161	8
Interwar period	145	30
1945-1975	25	18

As for the original languages of the translations into Yiddish, the main language is Russian in the three catalogues (Jerusalem, New York and Paris).

TRANSLATIONS FROM	JERUSALEM	NEW YORK	PARIS
RUSSIAN	125	93	148
FRENCH	81	92	86
ENGLISH	47	60	58
GERMAN	18	42	66

It is clear that each library has and can only have some of the published literary translations, but the figures which they give are revealing of the scope and nature of translations into Yiddish. Also of interest is a list of writers whose translated works are to be found in

the Medem Library in Paris. It numbers 431 titles by 154 authors. There too pride of place goes to Russian with 148 books by 51 authors, and next comes French with 86 books by 23 authors. In third place is German with 66 (23 authors), and then English with 58 (25 authors). Many major writers of European literature were translated in that period encompassing works by such authors as Rabelais, Shakespeare, Gallsworthy, Goethe, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Maupassant, Dostoevski, Heine and D'Anunzio to name but a few. Some translations from Spanish (and from Russian) that were printed in Argentina should also be mentioned, among them the important Yiddish version of *Don Quixote* by Pinye Katz.

One can also find in Yiddish translations from Persian, Japanese, Chinese etc., mostly retranslated from a European language, usually English.<sup>4</sup>

For translations from Yiddish into English, we have an important bibliography compiled by the long-serving directress of the YIVO Library in New York, Dinah Abramovicz. It lists:

YEARS	TITLES
Up until 1945	80
1945 - 1968	248
1969 - 1974	28

Of the post-war 276 titles, 126 are prose, 23 — poetry, 39 — history and sociology, 15 are biographies and memoirs, while 16 are religious in character. Added to this are 28 anthologies from between 1945 and 1974, of which 6 are devoted to poetry. In recent years there have been three significant anthologies of modern Yiddish poetry in English; the monumental bilingual anthology *American Yiddish Poetry* by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (University of California Press: Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London, 1986, 813 pp., 7 poets, 282 poems), the bilingual *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* edited by Irving Howe, Ruth Weiss and Khone Shmeruk



(Viking Penguin: New York, 1987, 721 pp., 39 poets, 219 poems) and the anthology by Aaron Kramer, *A Century of Yiddish Poetry* (Cornwall Books: New York/ London/Toronto, 1989, 368 pp., 364 poems by 136 poets and 7 folk songs).

What of the connection between Yiddish and French? If until 1939 translations of French literary prose occupied a respected place immediately after Russian, the opposite is true of translations from Yiddish into French. For this period we find only 7 titles, one of which is poetry. From 1945 to 1960 the number increases to 14 titles, 3 of which are a quarterly journal, *Domaine Yiddish*, devoted entirely to translations from and articles about Yiddish literature. From 1960 to 1975 there are 44 titles, of which 7 are poetry, among them the important anthology by Charles Dobzynski, *The Mirror of a People* (Gallimard: Paris, 1971). From 1976 to 1986 there are 9 titles, and 16 items since 1987, some no less important than previous works such as *Tsene rene* translated by Jean Baumgarten (Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi de Janow, *Le Commentaire sur la Torah (Tseenah uReenah)*. Introduction, traduction française et notes de Jean Baumgarten, Verdier: Lagrasse, 1987, 944 p.), the second, enlarged edition of Dobzynski's *The Mirror of a People*, Moyshe Kulbak's *Zelmenyaner* translated by Regine Robin, Oyzer Varshavski's *Shmuglyares* by Ratchimov, Sholem Asch's trilogy *Petersburg, Moscow and Warsaw* translated by Vevyorka, Ratchimov and Rachel Ertel, *Der sheydem tants* ("Dance of the Demons") by Esther Kraytman translated by Lisette Cahan and Carole Ksiazenicer. A volume of short stories translated by a group of young translators, edited by Rachel Ertel appeared in 1989 and in the last months two more important works: translations of both volumes of *Di Khalyastre* and a collection of poetry and poetry in prose by Abraham Sutzkever under the name *Dortn vu es nekhtikn di shtern* ("Where the Stars Bed Down"). One should also mention in most recent times a collection of plays by Y. L. Peretz, Sholem Asch, Aaron Tzcytlin, Avrom Goldfaden, Itzik Manger translated by Batya Baum, Aristid

Demonico, Carole Ksiazenicer, Jaques Mandelbaum, Sonia Lipshitz and others. Some of these have already been published, others have been performed or read publicly.

Among the earlier translators from Yiddish into French one should mention Isaac Pougatch, Yosef Gotfarshtein, and Nina Gurfinkel whose translation of the Sh. An-ski's *Tsvishn tsvey veltn* (*Der Dybbuk*) continues to be performed on the French stage.

During the same period the number of translations from French into Yiddish has greatly diminished. Between 1945 and 1975 there were only five translations of literary prose, though one could also count *The Last of the Just* by André Schwarz-Bart translated and published in Israel. With regard to poetry, except those appearing in a few periodicals and poetry collections, we can only point to a limited number of poems by Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud translated into Yiddish by Malka Loker in her monographs devoted to these poets, and published in Israel, and to the two volumes of my anthology of *Frantseyzische poezie, iberzetsungen un komentarn* (Paris, 1968 and 1986).

For translations from Yiddish into Russian we have the data provided in Startzev's bibliographies. They include only literary works and start in 1934 thereby leaving out the important and productive period, 1920s and early 1930s. From 1934 to 1941 Startzev lists 78 items, from 1941 to 1945 (during the Second World War) 14 items, and from 1945 to 1948 a mere 9 items. For the dark years between 1948 and 1954 only 3 items are listed. After 1956 there is a slight increase, and between 1955 and 1961 Startzev lists 69 items, among them 6 volumes of Sholem Aleichem's Collected Works and 36 items of poetry. Among these are the writings of the great Yiddish poets who were killed under Stalin — Dovid Hofshiteyn, Peretz Markish (2 volumes in 1960 and a new volume of over 600 pages in 1969), Leyb Kvitko (10 items); later on there is a volume of translations of Ezre Fininberg (1965) and Moyshe Kulbak's poems (1969), and an anthology of poems by 48 poets (1985). According

to the publications listed in the Jewish National and University Library's bibliographic annual, *Kiryat Sefer*, between 1965 and 1974 there were 48 titles published in the Soviet Union, translations from Yiddish into Russian, and of these 27 were poetry.

These figures appear not to include all published translations. The matching of numbers with years speaks for itself and requires no further comment. More necessary and more revealing would be an analysis of the selection in the creative sum of each author. This would illuminate the relationship between Yiddish and Russian literature and especially the disproportionate bulk of poetry. Of 221 items, 123 are poetry, more than half, something that does not occur with any other language, except perhaps in the case of Yiddish and Hebrew, but there we have a tendency in translation which is distinct from all others.

The specificity which exists between Yiddish and Hebrew is the natural and logical result of cultural, historical and linguistic interweaving in the course of centuries, particularly strong in the transformational period of Jewish society. We need to mention our classical writers in this context. Almost all bilingual writers translated their own work. More accurately, they reworked their own writing, and through this process both language and literature in Yiddish and Hebrew were further developed and modernised. It was not so much a question of true translations, but rather a subtle internal interlingual parallelism. It is sufficient to recall Mendele Moykher-Sforim, who created a modern prose style in both languages, or Bialik's example, which, through the translation of his poem, *Beyir hohareygo* [*Be'ir haharega*] - *In shkhite shtot* and through his fifteen poems originally written in Yiddish (*Dos letste vort* "The Last Word" and others) infused the folk-language with the distilled pathos and passion of prophetic style, just as in his Hebrew *Shirei 'Am*, were patterned on the folk-like quality and sing-song rhythms of Yiddish.

The specificity also appears in the number of translations between Yiddish and Hebrew compared to other languages. Thus we find in

the catalogue of the National and University Library in Jerusalem 258 translations from Yiddish, 66 of these being poetry, compared to 25 from Hebrew into Yiddish, of which 7 are poetry. In Israel, which is not only the centre of Jewish culture in Hebrew, but has, for historical reasons, become the most important centre today for Yiddish literature, this tradition of translation continues. There is a great deal more being translated from Yiddish into Hebrew than vice-versa. Between 1965 and 1975 there were 948 translations from literature in all languages into Hebrew, including 112 from Yiddish, of which 40 were poetry. During the same period there were only 5 translations from Hebrew into Yiddish, albeit of important works such as the poems of Abraham Shlonski by Moyshe Yungman, or the work of the Nobel Prize winner Sh. Y. Agnon translated by Elyezer Rubinshteyn and others. One must also mention several important translations from Russian into Yiddish published in Israel, such as *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, or a poetry collection by Sergei Yesenin translated by Yoysef Papyernikov.

## V

The theoretical problems of translation in general, the meeting of two world-views, present themselves differently when applied to Yiddish as a source or target language. For Yiddish as a target language these problems are, after all, no more complicated than in other languages. As a source language, peculiarities appear which are difficult to overcome. In general, simple translation into Yiddish from other languages, at least European ones, is simpler than vice-versa. Perhaps the particular feeling and charm of Yiddish is precisely in the individualised and rare fusion of the eastern and the European; in the manner in which it has taken over and absorbed from the sacred language and Aramaic, Biblical and Talmudic, folklore and Chassidic elements on the one hand and from the general European sphere on the other. For Yiddish as a target language the concern is therefore with communicating, embodying

the general occasional partnerships; whereas as a source language, the specificity, that which separates it from general spheres is in one word *yidishkayt*.

Here at first glance there emerges in essence a paradoxical phenomenon; those works which are in their form-content entirety most densely moulded in Yiddish specificity (*yidishkayt*), are also actualised in translation. Naturally the first impulse must be individual talent, the craftsmanship of the author and the success of the translation itself. But possibly something else finds expression here; the density of *yidishkayt* grows through with its roots deeper than descriptive reality, into hidden cells where it fuses with those elements which overcome specific descriptiveness; it thus fuses with the concealed, still unexpressed and therefore unmediated forms of communicability.

One can cite many learned examples of this from modern literature. One of the most instructive examples is that of Sholem Aleichem, who more than anyone else has been translated into countless languages, including Chinese, Japanese and Swahili, while being ostensibly hardest of all, even impossible to translate. The ingenuity of Sholem Aleichem, it turns out, is such that no matter how much is lost in the target language, that which remains is nevertheless enough to sustain laughter and tears revealing the eternally human within the eternally Yiddish of his heroes. The same is true, in a different constellation, of Itzik Manger's or Abraham Sutzkever's poetry, translated into numerous languages including Japanese and Malay, and yet still maintaining their original power.

It is clear that even in this respect, the problems of translation in Yiddish and Hebrew are quite different, and generally of a specific nature. Although two different languages, they are created by the same people, two languages which for a thousand years coexisted in a close symbiosis always bearing an influence one upon the other.

The crucial role which the parallel development of translations into Yiddish and Hebrew has played has already been shown, but

within this phenomenon it is significant that the ratio of prose to poetry is diachronic. In the mass of translations into Yiddish up until the First World War poetry occupied a meagre place. In the same timespan, poetry in Hebrew attained one of its highest points, quantitatively and qualitatively. At that time one could already read Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Byron, Goethe, Pushkin, Heine, Rabindranath Tagore and Nietzsche in Hebrew.

This imbalance of poetic translations from the past was due to reasons which at the time led to the same diachrony in the original Jewish literature in both its languages. But beside that, there were other more specific reasons in the realm of translation, which illuminate the needs not only of the readerships of both languages, but also of their translators. In Hebrew, first-rate poets also concerned themselves with translation; Shaul Tchernikhovski, David Frishman and others, including the great Khaim Nakhman Bialik. In 1924 his splendid translation of Schiller's *William Tell* was published, and in 1929 fragments of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.<sup>5</sup> They all participated in this work not only because of demand, but also because of a more generally perceived need to bring the best of world literature into Hebrew. But principally, they were prodded by their own creative impulses, just as occurred one generation later with the great Hebrew poet Abraham Shlonski, whose translations of Pushkin's poetry are recognised today as the most perfect.

In Yiddish this occurred less frequently, and also later. Except for several works by Russian poets and by Heine, there was very little to be found by the end of the nineteenth century. This picture alters significantly in the first decade of this century. It is important to mention the name of Leyb Naydus, himself a talented poet who was also one of the first significant modern translators of European poetry into Yiddish. The young poet, who died in 1918 at the age of 28 of Spanish Flu which raged throughout Europe at the end of the First World War, began his important literary contribution before he was even 20 years old. In addition to his own majestically masterful

work, he translated poetry from Russian, German and English, but most significantly from French. In this regard he was, most likely, a pioneer. Pride of place in his French translations goes to Baudelaire with 55 poems; from Russian there are 41 poems by Pushkin<sup>6</sup> as well as four chapters of *Eugene Onegin* and another 42 poems by Lermontov.

Between the wars poetry features more strongly in translations into Yiddish. There are translations from German, from English (eg Walt Whitman by Luis Miler), from French (6 poems by Baudelaire and 4 by Verlaine translated by Simkhe Shvarts, published in Czernowitz, 1936), but mainly from Russian. In 1919 in Ekaterinoslav (now called Dniepropetrovsk) there appeared a complete translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* by A. Y. Grodzensky. In the 1930s the great poet Dovid Hofshateyn, later to fall prey to Stalin's purges on 12th August 1952, translated various poetic and prose works by Pushkin, Lermontov, and by the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevtshenko and others. Among the other translators of Pushkin, Lermontov, as well as modern Russian poetry were Shmuel Halkin, Lipe Reznik, Ezre Fininberg and Moyshe Khashtshevatski. At the same time there was an acceleration of translations of Yiddish poetry into Russian.

After 1945 translations of Yiddish poetry share the same fate as that of any translations into Yiddish; but they never completely disappear. We have already mentioned translations from French poetry. As for Russian poetry, besides a book of poems by Lermontov into Yiddish (*Der emes*: Moscow, 1946), we must emphasise the continuing translations from Russian poetry outside the Soviet Union by Leon Faynberg, Ber Lapin, Meyer-Ziml Tkatch, and others. It is worth mentioning that in modern periodicals in Yiddish one can also find translations of poetry from various languages.

## VI

One remembers the saying of the Russian poet Zhukovskii, whose translations from German poetry are, without doubt, better,

and had a stronger influence on Russian poetry, than his own poetic oeuvre. "The translator of prose," he said, "is a craftsman, that of poetry a rival." But one certainly does not become a rival to a Homer or a Pushkin; so such a reflection should fill the translator with modesty as well as pride, and even a little fear.

Every translation of poetry is a creative adventure, a creative act subject to all the rules and freedoms of poetic creation, with all its pleasures and privations. It is a double adventure to experience the creative process of the poet-author, to whom the translator is slave and subject, while living through the craft of his own translator's language, of which he is master and reformer. In this way we can express the dialectical relationship between necessity and freedom in poetic understanding. Paul Valéry's reference to the 'borrowed line' with which each poetic creation begins, is valid for both poet and translator. But the relationship between it and that which Valéry calls the 'constructed verse' is different. The poet 'constructs' his verses around 'the given verse' in a free spiral. The translator must lead it back to that original construction.

The imperative to translate and to be translated lies in nature itself. Poetic language is not only code but also magic. That is, it not only gives information about a specific phenomenon, but through the way in which that information is given, through the *word* in the text and outside the text, with its sense, its power of association, its sounds and rhythmical weight, it gives birth to the phenomenon itself, transforming *wordmeaning* into *wordcreation*.

In poetic translation *wordcreation* reflects the original work. The translation is carried out according to the saying of Cicero regarding the translation of Greek texts into Latin; 'not by reckoning, but by substance'. The translated poem needs its own substance, so that it reads as a poem in its own right. Therefore translations strive to be more or less faithful to the substance and tonality of the original, while reconciling in an infinity of nuance the often conflicting claims of fidelity and beauty.



When translating according to substance, naturally the relationship between source and target languages must vary. Here the creative transformation takes place, the transferring of the polysemic word in its organic unity and completeness of meaning, symbol and sound, abandoning two imperatives; on the one hand that a second language text should not intrude as a foreign body which the source language is discarding, on the other that the text should not assume too much of its own character.

As to the possibility or otherwise of translating poetry, there are mountains of theories, explanations and practices; but the bottom line in the debate is that translation is as old as antiquity itself, and will never cease.

## Appendix

The challenge to translate poetry prevails over and indeed nurtures the countless theories and traditions of poetic translation. Following is but a small sample of how a short poem by Paul Verlaine was translated into Russian (by F. Sologub), German (by Stefan George), Hebrew (by Zeev Jabotinsky) and Yiddish (by M. Litvine):

Paul Verlaine

### CHANSON D'AUTOMNE

Les sanglots longs  
Des violons  
De l'automne  
Blessent mon cœur  
D'une langueur  
Monotone.

Tout suffocant  
Et blême, quand  
Sonne l'heure,  
Je me souviens  
Des jours anciens  
Et je pleure;

Et je m'en vais  
Au vent mauvais  
Qui m'emporte  
Deçà, delà,  
Pareil à la  
Feuille morte.

**ОСЕННЯЯ ПЕСНЯ**

О, струнный звон  
 Осенний стон,  
 Томный, скучный.  
 В душе больной  
 Напев ночной  
 Однозвучный.

Туманный сон  
 Былых времён  
 Ночь хоронит.  
 Томлюсь в слезах,  
 О ясных днях  
 Память стонет.

Душой с тобой,  
 О ветер злой,  
 Я, усталый.  
 Мои мечты  
 Уносишь ты,  
 Лист увялый.

**HERBSTLIED**

Seufzer gleiten  
 Die Saiten  
 Des Herbst entlang  
 Treffen mein Herz  
 Mit einem Schmerz  
 Dumpf und bang.

Beim Glockenschlag  
 Denk ich zag  
 Und voll Peinen  
 An die Zeit  
 Die nun schon weit  
 Und muss weinen.

Im bösen Winde  
 Geh ich und finde  
 Keine Statt..  
 Treibe fort  
 Bald da bald dort -  
 Ein welches Blatt.

## האַר בּס ט נ ע ז אַ נ ג

מיט פֿידל קלאַנג,  
וואָס קלאַנגט זיך לאַנג  
און מאַנאַמאַנע  
דער האַרבסט וואָס קומט,  
וועקט אויף די וואונד  
אין מיין נשמה.

עס ווערנט מיך שווער,  
איך ווילן זען די הער  
די שעהען שלאָגן;  
און קלער פֿון דעם,  
וואָס איז געזען  
און איז פֿאַרטראַגן.

און איך פֿאַרשווינד,  
פֿון וויסטן ווינט  
און בייזן וועטער  
געיאָגט אָן רו,  
געגליבן צו  
פֿאַרוועלקטע בלעטער.

## שיר ס ת ו

בנהי טקרוז  
הוסה כנור  
טבט פרויע,  
ואל הלב  
חודר באב  
וגעגוע.

שמון יפעם -  
לבי גדהם,  
פני יחורי,  
ובדסמות  
אזכר שעות  
אשר עברו.

ואז יטיב  
בלא שביב  
אותי הספר -  
ישא, יגלה  
כמו עכה  
שמת ביער...

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> From then until today the Bible has sustained a career in translation which is in a class of its own. It has been translated completely or in part, faithfully or otherwise into 1900 different languages and dialects. On Bible translations into Yiddish see Aptroot, 1989 (cf also Zlotnik, 1929 and Meschonnic, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Naturally it also had a very strong influence upon the language and content of the original Yiddish and Hebrew literatures. However this belongs to literary history rather than to the realm of translation per se.

<sup>3</sup> As a curiosity it is perhaps worth mentioning that the well-known French author Leon Blau (1846-1917) once found some translations of Moris Rosenfeld's songs in a periodical and wrote about them in an article.

<sup>4</sup> Most translations of French literary prose were published before 1914, and it is not always easy to tell how many were done directly from the original and how many from an already existing translation into Russian, or in fewer cases, German.

<sup>5</sup> One should also mention Bialik's translation of Sh. An-ski's *Der Dybbuk* into Hebrew (see Werses, 1986, pp. 132-172 for a detailed analysis of this rendition). This translation was prepared for the phenomenally successful 1922 production at the Habima Hebrew Theatre Company (originally based in Moscow and later the National Theatre of Israel). Bialik also translated, this time into Yiddish, three poems by Yehuda Halevi ('Yam-lider') and one poem from Heinrich Heine ('Di printsesn shabes'). On Yiddish translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays see Zilbertsvayg, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> On the translations of Pushkin's poetry into Yiddish see Loytsker, 1939.

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