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Discovering the Obliterated World via the Yiddish Language and Literature

From my early years I was an ardent reader devouring all kinds of books, those written originally in Polish and translations from French, English, German, Russian and other languages. While in high school in early 1970s I got particularly interested in American literature. After the political thaw in October 1956, marking the end of the Stalinist period, numerous American works were translated into Polish. Excellent translators like Bronisław Zieliński, Anna Przedpełska-Trzeciakowska, Kalina Wojciechowska or Maria Skibniewska were active at that time and their works carefully edited. Obviously the censorship did not allow for some works to be published, but there were enough interesting books in bookstores or libraries to give one an idea about the richness of American writings. So I devoured everything that was made available and I oscillated between images of New York fire escapes from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and depictions of the disintegration and collapse of traditional bonds and structures in the American South. Additionally Polish theatres often presented American plays and they were also available on TV theatre that at that time was on a very high level. Therefore Erskine Caldwell, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner, William Saroyan, not to mention Truman Capote or Jerome Salinger, were on the top of my reading list

Then, in the mid-1970s, already as a student at the English Department of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, I learnt about a different group of American writers, experimenting with form and language. Robert Coover, John Barth or Donald Barthelme – those were the names that attracted my attention, so I put aside Ernest Hemingway, Francis Scott Fitzgerald or Truman Capote and started collecting materials for my MA thesis devoted to post-modern fiction. For me, a student from a grey provincial city of Lublin American literature in both its more traditional and more experimental forms was a window to the world. "I am certainly not going to stay here all my life," I thought. And then in 1977, I received a letter from a Jewish British girl who responded to one of the ads for pen friends that I had placed in a couple of international magazines. What attracted her attention in my ad was exactly that provincial city of Lublin. She wrote that she would like to correspond with someone from Poland because her favorite Polish composer was Frederic Chopin, and her favorite Polish writer—Isaac Bashevis Singer. "What do I think about his novels," she asked,

"for instance about *The Magician of Lublin*?" It was then that I first heard Bashevis's name since he figured on the censor's list, like a number of Jewish authors after the infamous "anti-Zionist" and in fact anti-Semitic campaign of 1967-8 and was completely unknown in Poland. I managed to find two American editions of his books in English in the library of the Catholic University of Lublin (as a private university at that time it had wide contacts with the West in comparison with the state university where I studied and received various gifts, so books officially banned in Poland, e.g. Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* or George Orwell's novellas, were available there) and I read them mesmerized. The way of writing, rather traditional, was very different from what I considered literature worth reading and translating at that time, but the world he described was very new to me in spite of the fact that the action took place in Warsaw, Lublin or the little town of Goraj. I decided to translate some of his stories and then problems arose, not only of linguistic but also of cultural nature since I was completely ignorant of Jewish culture. What is Simchat Torah, the month of Nisan, a ritual bath? How do you render in the Polish language the strangely sounding names of characters, additionally distorted by English transliteration? Those were not the times of internet or easily accessible Judaic lexicons and encyclopedias. Fortunately, I was able to befriend some elderly Jewish people in Lublin who helped me by explaining some mysterious words and expressions. But I realized all the time that I had no access to the originals, that I translated this prose into Polish via the intermediary language, and that numerous important aspects must have been lost in this process. But those were the times when it was very difficult to find a place to study Yiddish in Poland, not to mention access to the original works; only some of them were published in book form and most in installments in Yiddish press, mainly in New York.

Therefore a crucial event in my scholarly life was the opportunity of spending the academic year 1988-1989 in New York thanks to a fellowship of the American Council of Learned Societies. I was working on my book on Isaac Bashevis Singer at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York and I also received a chance to attend an intense Yiddish language course at Columbia University that was the first step to the possibility of translating Bashevis Singer's works from the original. This time although I still looked at fire escapes with sentiment and even lived in a brownstone perhaps similar to the one Truman Capote describes, I rather explored the city from the point of view of the Jewish presence there: the Lower East Side, Washington Heights, Williamsport in Brooklyn. And the main point was the old YIVO building on the 86th Street East Side. Bashevis Singer lived on the 86th Street on the West Side, but he spent most of his time in Miami and was already quite senile and ill at that

time, so in spite of my efforts I was unable to meet him. But I was able to gradually read his Yiddish originals and prove my earlier intuition that a lot was lost in translation, although on the other hand, those simplified Americanized versions made the writer famous and if not for them I would have probably never received that letter from England. However, reaching Yiddish originals helped me solve some intriguing puzzles, including one connected with one of the best-known stories by Bashevis Singer known in English as "The Spinoza of Market Street." While translating it from the English version I had a dilemma how to render the street from the title. There was a very small street in Warsaw at the time the story takes place called "Rynkowa" which is a direct translation of "Market Street" but something was wrong with topography. From the description in the story it is clear that this is a long and bustling street. But I had no choice, I had to follow the English title. When I got hold of the Yiddish original in New York, I discovered that the original title was "Der shpinozist" (so the name of the street does not figure in the title at all) and the main protagonist, Dr. Nahum Fishlzon, an eccentric admirer of Spinoza, lives in Krochmalna Street, the same street where the writer lived in his childhood and that he commemorated in numerous works. Probably Bashevis Singer's publishers convinced him that a literary translation of the title as "The Spinozist" would be bland for the English language reader, while using "Krochmalna" instead of "Market Street" would be too exotic and difficult to pronounce. Much later, I discovered in Singer's archives at the University of Texas at Austin that actually the writer had considered the title "The Spinoza of Krochmalna Street," so in the recent Polish edition of thirty-six stories translated directly from Yiddish I included this story under the title "Spinoza z ulicy Krochmalnej."[1]

Apart from mysteries of translation another surprising discovery was awaiting me during my stay in New York and another proof of my ignorance. "So you are from Lublin?" some people familiar with Yiddish literature said. "Interested in Bashevis? Well, anyway his older brother was a better writer. If he were still alive he would have received the Nobel Prize (Israel Joshua Singer died in 1944 in New York at the age of fifty-one). And what do you think about Yankev Glatshteyn?" Unfortunately, I had never heard of Yankev Glatshteyn[2]

[1] More on intricacies of translations from Yiddish into English, see my article "A Historical Decontextualization of Eastern Europe: Transformations of Polish Jewish Space in Translations of Yiddish Literature into English," in *Yiddish and the Field of Translation: Agents, Concepts and Discourses across Time and Space*, edited by Olaf Terpitz (Wien, 2020), 77-95. See also my article on differences between Yiddish and English versions: "Isaac Bashevis Singer's Works in English and Yiddish: The Language and the Addressee," in *Isaac Bashevis Singer: His Work and His World* (Leiden-Boston, 2002), 17-29.

[2] I will use both spellings in the essay as the form Glatstein is widely used in English publications, while Glatshteyn is a transcription from Yiddish.

before, so ashamed of my ignorance and also puzzled by a new discovery I slowly learned that he was born in Lublin in 1896, left for New York in 1914, just before the outbreak of WWI, established together with other Yiddish poets an important movement called introspectivism in English and inzikhism in Yiddish, that in the summer of 1934 after twenty years' absence he returned to Poland for a couple of months to visit his dying mother, and as a result of this visit he wrote two travelogues *Ven Yash iz geforn* (When Yash Went Away) and *Ven Ven Yash iz gekumen* (When Yash Arrived), not so long ago published in English in new and revised translations as *The Glatstein Chronicles.* In these books he combines his reminiscences and reflections from various times, but notably from his childhood and young years in Lublin juxtaposed with his American experience. I also found out that like a number of Yiddish writers and critics, Glatstein was quite critical of Bashevis Singer and accused him of betraying the Jewish tradition and attuning his fiction to the unrefined taste of the non-Jewish audience. It is quite often mentioned in this context that Cynthia Ozick presented a satirical image of these two authors in her novella "Envy, or Yiddish in America" where they figure under the fictitious personas of the frustrated and embittered poet Edelstein and a cunning popular author of short stories Yankel Ostrover, called by his adversaries the *shed*, that is Demon, or Yankee Doodle. Although Ozick denied a direct reference to Glatstein, this does not change the fact that she brilliantly captured reservations and bitter sentiments of various immigrant writers who did not want to abandon their language and had to rely on translations that rarely brought them fame. Bashevis Singer was lucky to find good translators and publishers, interested in promoting his work, and was ready to make various concessions to reach the American audience and then the world audience via the English versions. Glatstein as a poet, experimenting with form and language, shared the fate of a number of authors writing in minor languages who are considered great masters in their native milieus but hardly translatable into other languages. As Richard Fein stated in the introduction to a bilingual volume of his poetry: "if Glatshteyn had written in any well-known language, he would have by now an international reputation".[3]

Both Bashevis Singer and Glatstein spent most of their lives in New York (Glatstein from 1914 to 1971 and Bashevis from 1935 to 1991, so 57 and 56 years respectively) and both contributed regularly to American Yiddish press. While Glatstein focused mainly on literary and cultural topics, Bashevis under the pennames of D. Segal and Yitshkok Varshawsky also wrote numerous popular pieces on various topics for *Forverts*, e.g. "What

[3]Richard J. Fein, "Introduction" in *With Everything We've Got: A Personal Anthology of Yiddish Poetry*, edited and translated by Richard J. Fein (Austin, TX, 2009), xxiv.

makes a person happy?" (1961, Jan, 1961) or "Does romantic love no longer exist?" (Oct. 17, 1962) which understandably could have confirmed an opinion of a number of critics about him leading a double life as a creator of *shund* ("trash" novels) next to canonical literature.

What both Bashevis Singer and Glatstein have in common is that they frequently return in their works to Lublin, Glatstein as to the city of his birth, and Bashevis to Lublin as a very important center for Polish Jews. And thus in his first volume from 1921 entitled *Yankev Glatstein* the poet focuses on his self, *in zikh*. But in 1938, under the influence of political changes in Europe he announced in his poem "A gute nakht, velt" a return to the ghetto understood as a traditional Jewish community (in a different sense than the word became known during the Holocaust), and later he became one of the most important poets of the Shoah, commemorating among others the Jews of Lublin. And in 1966 he published a collection of poems with a title completely different from the debut volume: *A Yid fun Lublin*, "A Jew from Lublin." So he no longer focuses on his self, but becomes a Jew from Lublin, walking in the streets of New York, feeling that he is part of the city: "a bateiligter Yid bin ich gegangen oyf nyu-yorker gasn." He wrote numerous other poems referring to New York and combining references to the city of his young years and the city of his residence as an established author (therefore in the volume of his poetry that was published in Lublin in 2021 among four sections there is one entitled "In New York"[4]).

Let me quote one short poem, favored by Glatstein himself, because he included it in a number of volumes. It gives an idea of musicality of his poetry. I will quote it in the superb English translation by Richard Fein:

Turtledoves

The thrust of thought,
sunglare across
bare blade, flare
of memory.
Suddenly –
cheder years and a word –
Just one word:
Turtledoves.
It won't go away:
supple crinkle of *turtle*,
its caressing wrinkle.
Oh, turtledoves
turtledoves.

[4] See Jankew Glatsztejn, *Dobranoc świecie*, selected and edited by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska and Bella Szwarcman-Czarnota (Lublin, 2021).

Turtle-turtle
turtledoves.
Cheder years, childhood years.
And it sings.
And stalks.
And croons.
And haunts:
Turtledoves
turle-turtle
turtledoves.[5]

So to an adult poet in an apartment in New York, a blade of a knife brings memories from an elementary Hebrew school in Lublin. Jewish children would often begin studying the book of Leviticus from a fragment (1: 14-17) about sacrificing turtledoves to God. So the sight of a sharp kitchen knife is combined in the poet's mind with recollections of common sounds of pigeons or turtledoves in his childhood years. The sounds of Lublin return to him in New York.

The above-mentioned Richard Fein, who translated a number of Glatstein's poems into English, a talented poet himself, in his "personal anthology of Yiddish poetry" included also his own poem entitled "Yankev Glatshteyn Visits Me in the Coffee Shop":

I was facing the back
and didn't see him come in.
He shimmied into the booth
and I knew him right away.
He looked at me, clamped his lips. Sighed.
"I deliberately speak to you
in English because I want you
to understand me perfectly.
Since I died, by the way.
my English is better. I have
long conversations with Marianne Moore
about prose in poetry
and I exchange tales with Yeats –
he's not the snob he used to be.
He tells me a Celtic tale and I
tell him one about Chelm. [explain Chelm]
It's more literary the life there, but
we don't write anymore.
But that's not what I want to talk about.
It's all good and well you translate me.
<u>You need it more than I do. (emphasis mine)</u>
I'm in Yiddish for all time.
Not that I mind, mind you.

[5] Yankev Glatshteyn, "Turtledoves," in *With Everything We've Got…* , 5.

Be my guest. But you,
you have to translate yourself
into English. Stop fretting
about starting late. Be like
Yiddish literature – grow into your gift.
Don't brood over your unmetrical ear.
Listening to the truth rattles in you,
your ear will catch on. By the way,
I never mourn Yiddish anymore.
We gather in Peretz's salon-cloud –[explain Peretz]
our Yiddish will last forever there –
though no one blows in from a shtetl,
manuscript in hand.
Well, *zay gezunt*."
Absentmindedly, he eased away the sugar pourer,
from where it braced the laminated menu,
and his fingers played in the glass fluting;
as he moved out
he jarred the table
and my coffee shook.[6]

This playful, but quite insightful and meaningful poem, staged in a plain New York cafeteria, abounds in references to literature in English and Yiddish. Glatstein was very interested in American poetry and inspired among others by Walt Whitman (he and other inzikhists read Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens), but at the same time he was deeply attached to the Yiddish language. As a teenager he was taken by his father who played a great role in arousing his interest in secular Yiddish literature to Yitskhok Leib Peretz, a classic of Yiddish literature, born in Zamość and later living in Warsaw where he became a kind of literary institution. Aspiring writers would come to him to show him their works and ask for his expert advice. Glatstein's father took his son to show Perets his juvenile poetry.

But a line that in particular attracts my attention in this poem is "you need it more than I do". Yiddish literature is worth translating to show its variety and richness, to overcome certain stereotypes that associate Yiddish with stories about simple folks and dybbuks or fiddlers on the roof. As the example of Glatstein and other poets and writers shows modernism occupied an important place in Yiddish literature of the interwar period. Fortunately in recent years a number of Yiddish works have been translated or retranslated into English, Polish, Hebrew and other languages.

[6]Richard J. Fein, "Yankev Glatshteyn Visits Me in the Coffee Skop," in *With Everything We've Got*…., 116-117.

And this leads us to another important writer, Kadia Molodowsky whose work also refers to Lublin, although contrary to Glastein and Bashevis Singer she did not have any biographical connections with the city. Earlier I knew her as a poet and critic. Among others she is known for her beautiful poems for children, but recently I came across the English translation of her novel that was published in installments in the early 1940s in *Der Tog-Morgn Zhurnal*, the Yiddish daily where Glatstein was an editor. The English title *A Jewish Refugee in New York: Rivke Zilberg's Journal* differs from the original *Fun Lublin biz Nyu-york: Togbukh fun Rivke Zilberg*. The change of the title from what I know from the translator, Anita Norich, was to some extent dictated by commercial reasons (Lublin was not included in the title as not a very well-known place for American readers) and to some extent by the fact that earlier the subtitle of the novel was *Dos togbukh fun a yidish flikhtling-meydl,* that is "The diary of a Jewish refugee girl," so the English title is partly a reference to this earlier version. But the change of the title does not change the fact that Lublin itself and Jews originally from Lublin organized in a landsmanshaft in New York, an association grouping immigrants from particular towns or regions, figure prominently in the novel. It is not clear why Kadia Molodowsky chose a character from Lublin. To some extent this might have been a result of her collaboration with Glatstein, perhaps she attended some events organized by the Lubliner organization, but what is more important, I think, is that she wanted to bring to the big city of New York a Jewish girl from a traditional Jewish background and Lublin was perceived as a fairly traditional and somewhat backward place. A Jewish girl from Warsaw where Molodowsky lived for a number of years would not experience such a culture shock while settling in New York and would not be perceived as a complete greenhorn. We can recall in this context an oft-quoted fragment from *The Magician of Lublin* by Bashevis Singer which refers to the city of Lublin at the turn of the nineteenth century:

> The world beyond Lublin was in turmoil. Every day the Polish newspapers screamed war, revolution, crisis. Jews everywhere were being driven from their villages. Many were emigrating to America. But here in Lublin one felt only the stability of a long-established community. […] Old customs prevailed here: the women conducted business and the men studied Torah.[7]

In Molodowsky's novel it is no longer the time of stability because twenty-year-old Rivke leaves Lublin after the bombing of the city in September 1939, in which her mother was killed. The first entry is dated December 15, 1939 and entitled "My First Day in New York". The journal predominantly records the experience of a young immigrant from Eastern

Europe in the United States so from this point of view it has much in common with works by other immigrant authors, like for example Anzia Yezierska or later Eva Hoffman, and undoubtedly Kadia Molodowsky used in it some of her own linguistic experience when during her years in the US she was acquiring the English language. But what interests me at this point is the juxtaposition of Jewish Lublin and Jewish New York presented in a satirical manner. Rivke arrives in America on a beautiful day and she hopes that this is "a sign that things would go well for [her] in America". But when she reaches her aunt's home she senses her distant family is not too happy with her arrival and, what's more, her aunt and her cousin, exactly her age, laugh at her appearance: her "stockings, shirts and dresses." "In Lublin I was well dressed" – she notes: "Will I always be laughed at in America?"

> My aunt picked up all of my dresses and said, "Rags! We need to buy her a *dres* and a *het.* I could barely keep from crying. They greeted me as though I were some poor relative. Maybe it would have been better if I had stayed at home. I don't know what I'll do here. They all speak English, and I don't understand a word. I think they're talking about me, and it's as if, at the age of twenty, I've suddenly become deaf. [8]

In the course of her journal we encounter numerous cultural clashes, lack of understanding and sensitivity on the part of her cousins and other American Jews she encounters (those passages are very similar to the experience of Eva Hoffman in her first years in Vancouver[9]), but slowly she settles in the new environment and what seemed old-fashioned earlier turns out to be her asset. In the entry on July 21, 1940 entitled "Lubliners" she learns, amused and already much more self-confident, that people from Lublin occupy a special position in New York. Mrs. Shore, her aunt's neighbor, explains to her:

> You are a Lubliner too. I see how it is. You put your braids on top of your head, like a crown, as though all of New York was about to see you. Other girls run too much, laugh too much. But not you. Everything will come to you, and all you have to do is wait. That's some luck… but only the Lubliners can be like that. They have such clear eyes. Lucky.[10]

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[7]Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Magician of Lublin*, trans. Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer (New York, 1979), 16.
[8]Kadya Molodovsky, *A Jewish Refugee in New York*, trans. Anita Norich (Bloomington, Indiana, 2019), 1.
[9]See her *Lost in Translation; A Life in a New Language* (New York, N.Y. 1989).
[10] Kadya Molodovsky, 152.

So it turns out that Lublin is not such a provincial place after all, it assumes a more central role as it has in Yiddish literature. After all a demon in one of Bashevis Singer's stories says, "Ikh bin a Lubliner. Mikh kon men azoy gikh nisht opshrekn."("I'm from Lublin. I am not so easily frightened.)"[11] And when Yentl played by Barbra Streisand enters Lublin via a magnificent bridge on a wide river (the film was shot in Prague) we can chuckle, but from the point of view of Polish Jewish history and perspective of Jewish inhabitants of smaller neighboring towns and villages Lublin was a kind of metropolis.

The novel ends with Rivke's engagement and Americanization of her name. Rivke Zilberg remained in Lublin, she will be transformed into Ray Levitt in New York.

Readers familiar with Jewish American literature know very well that Yiddish figures prominently in the works of a number of Jewish American writers of both older generation like Henry Roth, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Woody Allen, but also younger ones like Dora Horn, Nathan Englander or Michael Chabon who refer in their works to the language of their grandparents. As a translator I realize how the knowledge of Yiddish allows me not only to read and translate Yiddish works, but also those in English and stylized as Yiddish voices. One of my favorite Jewish American authors is Grace Paley[12]. In a number of her works you can hear Yiddish being spoken, like in her well-known story "Goodbye and Good Luck" in which the narrator Rosie Lieber after years of waiting finally manages to convince Volodya Vlashkin, "the Valentino of Second Avenue" (where the Yiddish theater was located in New York):

> "Volodya Vlashkin," I told him straight, "when I was young I warmed your cold back many a night, no questions asked. You admit it, I didn't make no demands. I was softhearted. I didn't want to be called Rosie Lieber, a breaker up of homes. But now, Vlashkin, you are a free man. How could you ask me to go with you on trains to stay in strange hotels, among Americans, not your wife? Be ashamed."[13]

Aside from the fascination and enthusiasm for my research, translations and other undertakings in the field of Yiddish, I am constantly aware of the tragic fact that my coincidental interest in Jewish culture and history almost forty-eight years ago resulted from

[11] Yitskhok Bashevis, "Mayse Tishevits," in idem, *Gimpl tam un andere dertseylungen* (Nyu-york, 1963), 240. The English version: Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Last Demon," trans. Martha Glicklich and Cecil Hemley, in idem, *Short Friday and Other Stories* (London-New York, 1983), 105.
[12] Recently I translated her *Collected Stories* into Polish. See *Małe ludzkie zawirowania: Opowiadania zebrane* (Warszawa, 2024).
[13]Grace Paley, "Goodbye and Good Luck," in idem, *Collected Stories* (New York, N.Y., 2007), 12-13.

the complete ignorance and void, which in turn were a consequence of the unimaginable destruction. I would prefer to imagine a different scenario, in which in Lublin there is still the famous yeshiva at work, rather then turned into the Ilan hotel, as well as numerous synagogues and houses of prayer; Yiddish can be heard in the streets, there is a large Jewish community and a character like Rivke Zilberg could return to her home town after some years like Glatstein did in 1934. Obviously I might not be present in this scenario at all, perhaps I would continue my interest in post-modern American literature, or something completely different, but this would not matter at all because there would be hundreds of other people exploring these issues and there would be a rich culture which would not have to be rescued or re-discovered. However, we are not able to change history. Therefore, in spite of being constantly aware of the fact that Jewish Lublin no longer exists, I try to bring Yiddish literature to Polish readers. For me personally, there is no greater pleasure than reading Yiddish literature and discovering both in literary works and in the language itself connections with other languages and literatures. I am very happy that Jewish studies in Poland have flourished after the years of stagnation and that they are reaching higher and higher standards. I am likewise very happy that more and more Polish scholars decide to learn Yiddish and Hebrew in order to be able to make full use of original sources and critical literature. For my generation the road to Yiddish led via English and very often via American studies and support of various American institutions, especially Fulbright scholarships that I also took advantage of spending a year at Brandeis University which, in turn led to research on yizker bikher, Jewish memorial books, a number of them commemorating towns and villages of the Lublin region.[14]

As a result of my interest in Jewish culture I started looking at Lublin and other cities and towns in Poland, and especially at the shtetlekh in the Lublin region, with completely different eyes. They have become closer to me, worthy of greater attention. Paradoxes of tragic postwar history created a situation in which such a perception was possible only thanks to travels abroad and YIVO in New York played a very crucial role in gaining necessary knowledge. I had to leave Lublin for a while in order to recognize things that were almost at hand. I needed a letter from England to be able to look at well-known places from a completely different perspective. Isaac Bashevis Singer returned to Poland via translations of his works largely thanks to the Nobel Prize. Actually he helped disseminate interest in Jewish

[14]See the anthology of texts from almost a hundred yizker bikher translated into Polish form Yiddish, Hebrew and English: *Tam był kiedyś mój dom… Księgi pamięci gmin żydowskich*, edited by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Adam Kopciowski and Andrzej Trzciński (Lublin, 2009).

topics in the 1980s that later resulted after all kinds of political transformations into various valuable scholarly initiatives. For me he also opened the road to other Yiddish writers who deserve recognition.