

THE YIDDISH SONNETS BY M. FREED: NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF LITERARY YIDDISH IN BUKOVINA

The history of the Yiddish language may well be described as polycentric, meaning that there continually existed, no matter how inconstant they might have been in terms of their precise geographical location, more than one vigorous cultural attractor at a time, each of them rendering the entropy of Jewish culture centripetal and in this way not only debunking the tempting if forbidden fruit of assimilation, but withstanding ideological challenges issued by its Jewish competitors. In the late XIX and early XX cent. an important Jewish centre of the sort was Bukovina with its chief town, Czernowitz, proudly bearing the title of "ירושלים בײַם פּרוט" ("the Jerusalem on the Prut") [1, 210] and in doing so successfully competing with the faraway "ירושלים ד׳ליטא" ("the Lithuanian Jerusalem," Wilno).

And yet when discussing the corresponding literary and linguistic matters one may often come across a popular and not entirely unjustified view according to which this "Jew-friendly" location was almost inextricably linked to its inherent and pervading Germanizing aura, leaving any vernacular far behind. On the one hand, considerable proofs can be adduced to sustain the aforementioned opinion. In particular, analyzing the German-language literature of Bukovina, Petro Rykhlo mentions numerous facts showing that it was created mostly by ethnic Jews who viewed German culture as native and inspiring, and believed themselves to be full members of the German nation [2, 16]. On the other hand, despite its allegedly Germanized Jewry, the city still housed the trail-blazing Czernowitz Conference as well as was home to quite a number of Yiddish authors having attained international fame. Such discordant data induce one to arrive at the conclusion that, though Germanizing tendencies were present and, perhaps, quite widespread, the integral picture of local linguistic conditions can be dangerously distorted if painted in black and white. The literary work which the present paper concerns might well be viewed as a challenge to such oversimplifying attitudes.

The poetic collection entitled 'The Narcissi' ("נאַרציסן") was issued in Czernowitz in 1937 under the authorship of M. Freed (מ. פריד). One of the few still existing copies of the book is currently preserved at the Museum for the History and Culture of Bukovinian Jews whose authorities kindly gave permission to copy it for the present research. The other poetic collection, a less rare edition published in New York in 1942, is entitled "An evening by the Prut" ("אַװונט בײַם פּרוט") with M. Freed-Winner (sic!) (מ. פריד וויינינגער) designated as the author. The personal data obliquely mentioned in the preface to the latter edition allow to locate the author as, most probably, a native of Czernowitz who had started his literary career in Bukovina but then left for the West, the exact year of his departure either 1937 or 1938. As far as one can tell, his life has never been described with any degree of exhaustiveness. The poems analyzed in the present paper were written either in

Czernowitz, or on the author's way westward during the years between 1934 and 1942.

The first puzzle about the two books lies already in the genre which the author chooses to elaborate. Though not foreign to later Yiddish literature written mostly in the US, France, and Israel (J. L. Kalushiner, M. Leib, J. S. Taubes, Sh. Roitman), the sonnet enjoyed little popularity with East European Jewry and was rather looked upon as a suspiciously "gentile" genre, quite fit for languages such as English, or, in case with Bukovina, German, but hardly able to compete with the trademark Yiddish "לידער און באלאדעס" – "songs" and ballads. To be successfully executed in Yiddish, it needed the corresponding themes, imagery, and stylistic tones which could only have been borrowed from European literary tradition. In case with Freed these are represented by numerous historical and literary allusions (Bacchus, Nero, King Lear, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, swains, blonde damsels, troubadours etc) which needed the corresponding linguistic means not always available in the early XX century Yiddish. And yet in terms of literary matters "borrowing" can either mean "copying deferentially," or "developing within, having the foreign as an example", the former case being usually doomed to deadlock, but the latter one more often than not given a chance of survival. In case with Bukovina deference meant coming over to the German language and, largely, to the German nation while the other option meant turning Yiddish into a post-*shtetl* language of secular Jewry, part and parcel of the European (and not of "distorted German") cultural tradition. One has no grounds to state that the full range of Freed's poetic experimentation could have been accepted as the mainstream of the literary Yiddish language in Bukovina had the Jewish life there remained intact. And yet the linguistic data which the texts display are still of considerable interest to historians of the language.

The phonetic system of any language is generally regarded as extremely conservative, most unfriendly to borrowings and taking centuries to alter – usually, as resulting from the changes which the language undergoes on a larger scale. Yet, the orthoepy of any literary language is, on the contrary, most unstable, awarding privilege to certain dialects and sociolects and revoking it in case with the other. The debate about which norm of pronunciation the Yiddish language was supposed to follow, the two major options being ליטוויש (that of the Yiddish language as spoken in Lithuania and Byelorussia) and פויליש (that of Polish Yiddish) with פלל שפראך standards seeming a nonviable compromise, was indeed a heated one, making the author's choice the more significant. The differences between all the dialects primarily concerned the system of vocalism and were only scarcely reflected in spelling, which usually made it possible to read one and the same text following different standards of pronunciation. But in case with rhyming verse matters grew more complicated, since perfect rhymes grew general or eye rhymes, poetic meters lost smoothness etc. Freed follows the rhyme scheme of the Italian sonnet (a-b-b-a a-b-b-a c-d-c d-c-d), the regularities of which, since the rhyming words of a sonnet are strongly expected to form perfect rhymes and happen to comprise proper names, enable one to judge upon the pronunciation standards which he wanted his readers to stick to.

Despite the fact that in the neighboring Ukrainian and Polish dialects the phonetic value of *komets alef* was rendered as [u], there are good grounds to assume that in case with the texts under analysis it was to be realized as [o]. Notwithstanding the genre's intrinsic need for recurring rhymes and contrary to what is sometimes the case with Yiddish poetry (Cf. (ראנדעוואו – שעה – גראָ, מוז – פארדרוס – וואָס) [3], the syllables containing אָ never rhyme with those containing ו save in case with one Hebraism, its expected pronunciation, as far as one can judge, confirming the aforementioned correlation (גוג־מגוג [gogmegog] – פלאַג – וואָג – טאַג). The same is true of the proper name 'Nero' – נערָאָ which spelling would otherwise be impossible to account for, and, especially, of the exclamation "oh" (אָ, נערָאָ!). The realization of וי as [oj] seems highly probable in view of the rhyme בוים – רוים, the former element strongly expected to have [o] in the diphthong (Cf. *Roma, Rom, Rome*).

Less clear is the question with יי / יי since some of the sonnets, included in both collections, consistently reveal in both contexts the corresponding type of the two opposing spelling tendencies, thus turning צווייגן into צווייגן, שווייגן into שווייגן, זיידן into זיידן, the spelling of words like איינזאַמקייט, שניי etc remaining invariable. Since in both cases the rest of *nekudes* are preserved intact (for instance, the letter *alef* is not only marked with *komets* when standing for [o] but also with *pasekh* not to be mistaken for "mute" *alef* as in וואוהין), the spelling norms observed in "אָוונט ביים פרוט" cannot be accounted for by a technical fault. On the other hand, the rhymes comprising [ej] (like גיי – צוויי, חן – אַליין) are not interchangeable with those sharing the [aj / ej] element (פאַרבײַטן – ווייטן), thus urging one to interpret the phenomenon under consideration in terms of orthography rather than orthoepy, and, in all probability, as influenced by editorial changes.

Thus, Freed's orthoepic standards were strongly inclined towards the unpopular *klal shprakh* pronunciation norms, in this way renouncing those of either German-based *Litvish* or distinctly non-German *Poylish* dialects of Yiddish and seeking to popularize the Yiddish linguistic criteria proper.

One more minor tendency concerning both the author's orthoepic and spelling standards is connected with his representation of French borrowings which may be described as developing towards the original pronunciation pattern. Unlike the peculiarly Yiddish variant of טרעטאַר, Freed uses the word in the form of טראַטוואַר – 'sidewalk, pavement', and the word בולעוואַרד – 'boulevard' found in the collection "אָוונט ביים פרוט" in בולעוואַרד.

Despite the fairly significant role which Slavic borrowings play in Freed's poetry from the standpoint of the aesthetic effect achieved, they are peculiarly restricted within a rather narrow scope of the concepts expressed, denoting mostly landscape elements (סטעפּ – 'steppe', וואַלע – 'wave', ווערבע – 'willow', סאָנשעניק – 'sunflower' etc) and common notions of everyday life (טוילען זיך – 'huddle up to', פּוסטע – 'empty, desolate', ברודיק – 'dirty', האַרבאַטע – 'humpy' etc) in this way quite in keeping with D. Katz's interpretation of their comparative stylistic value in modern Yiddish [4, 162]. They are always traditional in terms of spelling and are not observed among either occasional words or neologisms applied by the author. And yet, remembering, on the one hand, the then strong disapproval of any Slavic

elements in Yiddish on the part of purists like Kh. Zhitlovsky or N. Shtiff as well as, on the other hand, the “elevated” nature of the genre, it is important to see that they are all the same present in Freed’s texts. This position becomes still more pronounced in the author’s alternate usage of fully or partially synonymic words irrespective of their etymology: קראָ, וואָראָנע – ‘crow’; כמארע, וואָלקן – ‘cloud’ (the difference of meaning similar to that between the Russian words *облако* and *тыча* is neutralized descriptively: “(עס שטייען שוואַרצע וואָלקסן אויף דער לוייער...” – ‘jade, nag’ and פערד – ‘horse’ etc.

Another tendency which could be observed in this connection, though not limited to Slavic elements only, is the neutralization of what might be regarded as “*shtetl* connotations”, which modified the meaning of many lexemes in accordance with habitual contexts or popular stereotypes. Thus, the word פאַסטוך, being an old Slavic borrowing to refer to a “non-Jewish” occupation and in this way slightly contemptuous (Cf. “...דער טאטע זיינער ... האָט געמוזט זיין אָדער א פאַסטעכ, אָדער א סטרושן, [5, 94], displays a distinct shift in meaning towards elevation, now denoting a swain rather than a shepherd (“...דערוואָסן מיט פאַסטוכס פלייטגעזאָנג”); this new sense is also clearly visible in the title of Freed’s 1951 book “אַ פאַסטוך אין” (‘a gentile girl,’ still registered as “often contemptuous” in U. Weinreich’s dictionary of 1968, takes on the form of שיקסעלעך, thus modifying its meaning, both morphologically and contextually, into that of ‘lass’ or ‘damsel’. A similar phenomenon is observed in case with the lexeme גר (אָז ווענעציאַנער האַנדלען נאָר מיט) “...סידאַכט זיך אויס אַ יעדן גר, אַז ווענעציאַנער האַנדלען נאָר מיט) (פיש...” which loses its peculiarly Yiddish meaning of ‘convert to Judaism’, taking on, instead, its original Hebrew meaning of ‘stranger’.

One more linguistic feature which is quite typical of Freed’s poetic style is the frequent use of borrowings, some of them contextually modified to help achieve the desired aesthetic effect. The words described as borrowings can, in fact, be viewed as falling into at least two distinct types: borrowings proper and freshly introduced internationalisms, many of them still preserving the flavor of foreignism. A vivid example of the latter kind may be produced by the author’s usage of the word וויאַלעט(ער). By now a distinct internationalism (Cf. Fr. *violet* / *violette*, Germ. *violett*, Eng. *violet* etc), the word was but finding its way into many modern languages at the time when Freed’s sonnets were created. From the standpoint of etymology it is necessary to observe that in Soviet Yiddish the word was often registered as פיאָלעטאַווע(ר) [6, 623], the explanation, in this particular case, being not so much the contortions which so many Yiddish words were forcibly subjected to, but its similarity with the Russian word *фиолетовый*, having become established in the Russian word-stock not long before. Thus, being fresh enough in the language itself and in this way quite acceptable in poetic diction, the word is the most frequently occurring color-denoting adjective in Freed’s sonnets. Moreover, its spell of novelty allows the author to use it not only in its literal sense (“אין וויאַלעטער דעמערונג”, “דעם וויאַלעטן באָרג”, “וויאַלעטע גלאָקן”), but also figuratively, in which case, as far as one can tell, its connotative meaning is that of exclusiveness and mystery (“...רױטן שרפּה”, “אַלץ וויאַלעטער צעשימערט האַרבסט זיך...” “שימער און וויאַלעטן”). In this way it seems more of a typological parallel than a

matter of literary influence that the corresponding Russian word had served a similar service to the Russian poet of fin de siècle Igor Severyanin. Some more color-denoting lexemes which Freed employs in a similar fashion may be (פורפור) – ‘purple,’ אָזור – ‘azure,’ קאָבאַלט – ‘cobalt,’ קאַרמין – ‘carmine’ etc. Besides, remembering Max Weinreich’s comment on Yiddish flower names [7, 234], a similar phenomenon can be observed in case with the lexemes representing this particular semantic field (אַלעאַנדער, סאַנשעניק, אַסטערן, גלאַקן, היאַצינטן, נאַרציסן) etc), and, to some extent, that of gem names.

As is the case with internationalisms, borrowings proper are quite peculiar to Freed’s poetic style. However, to delineate their scope and nature is not always easy since there exist rather few available dictionaries comprising the data fit for use in the present research, their quality not always satisfactory. In view of that, preference was given to the dictionaries compiled by Harkavy (1928) and U. Weinreich (1968), absence in both of them testifying to the word’s status as a borrowing. The words singled out on the basis of the procedure, though coming from different languages and sources, mostly share the common connotation of “European flavor” which might have simultaneously contributed to their poetic value. The lexemes which may be regarded as distinctly Bukovinian are the new borrowings from German: פּראָמענירען – ‘to stroll,’ Germ. *promenieren*, the non-assimilated status of the borrowing is signaled by the component ע – [e] in the verb ending (Cf. פאַרלירן but not פאַרלירען); שילפן – ‘made of reed,’ Germ. *Schlif* – ‘reed,’ as opposed to the standard Yiddish ראָר (Cf. Rohr); פּעלינאַר – ‘(complete) idiot,’ Germ. *Vollidiot*, the element *-idiot* transformed into נאַר (Cf. *Narr*); פּראָץ – ‘a (naughty, boisterous) teenage girl,’ Germ. *Fratz*. Other borrowings should rather be viewed as potential internationalisms which never penetrated the language by reason of cultural or religious differences: אינפערן – ‘troubadour,’ טרובאַדור – ‘inferno,’ בולעוואָר – ‘boulevard,’ ווילע – ‘villa,’ אָזור – ‘azure.’ Words like טרעלן – ‘to trill, to quaver’ and זאָנפט – ‘soft, mild’ (Cf. *sanft*) are of uncertain status, being registered in Harkavy’s dictionary but absent in Weinreich’s.

The introduction of the new poetic genre commonly regarded as distinctly “literary” was a challenge not only to the bred-in-the-bone status of Yiddish as a vernacular but also a trial of the language’s inner resources. In order to withstand the linguistic competition with German the author had to both mobilize the conventional linguistic expedients, many of them considerably modified so as to be contextually acceptable, and introduce new lexical units, in this way bridging the gap between the then nascent standards of the literary Yiddish language and popular parlance.

In 2005 a patriarch of Bukovina’s literature and, as his bitterly ironic self-introduction ran, “the last Yiddish writer” J. Burg reissued his early work “On the Cheremosh” (“אויפן טשערמוש”) translated in German (“Auf dem Czeremosz”), thus clearly expressing his vision of what lies in store for Yiddish in the contemporary world. In 1981 M. Freed had translated R. Ausländer’s poetry from German into by then clearly “postvernacular” Yiddish, thus no less clearly asserting that his vision of the same was the opposite. The latter fact not only shows the poet’s

devotion to the ideas of his youth, but suggests the continuation of research on the past and future of the literary Yiddish language.

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