

The Hermeneutics of Holocaust Literature

February 23, 1994

I. The Function of Realia & Lexicon

A. Władysław Szlengel's "Counter-attack"

Zdejmować rękawiczki z jasnej, gładkiej skóry,
Położyć pejcze—dać hełmy na głowy—
Jutro komunikat dać prasowy:
"Wbiliśmy się klinem w blok Toebbensa."

Bunt mięsa.

BUNT MIĘSA,

ŚPIEW MIĘSA!

Słysz niemiecki Boże,

— Jak modlą się Żydzi w dzikich domach,

Trzymając w ręku łom czy zierdź.

Prosimy Cię, Boże, o walkę krwawą.

Błagamy Cię o gwałtowną śmierć.

Niech nasze oczy przed skonaniem

Nie widzą jak się wloką szyny,

Ale daj dłoniom celność, Panie,

Aby się skrwawił mundur siny,

Daj nam zobaczyć, zanim gardła

Zawrze ostatni, głuchy jęk,

W tych butnych dłoniach, w łapach z pejczem

Zwyczajny nasz człowieczy lęk.

Jak purpurowe krwiste kwiaty,

Z Niskiej i z Miłej, z Muranowa,

Wykwita płomień z naszych łuf.

To wiosna nasza! To kontratak!

To wino walki uderza do głów!

To nasze lasy partyzanckie,

Zaułki Dzikiej i Ostrowskiej.

Drżą nam na piersiach numerki "blokowe",

Nasze medale wojny żydowskiej.

Krzyk czterech liter błyska czerwienią,

Jak taran bije słowo: BUNT. . .

.....

A na ulicy krwią się oblepia

Zdeptana paczka:

"JUNO SIND RUND!"¹⁰

from: Frieda W. Aaron, Bearing the Unbearable: Yiddish and Polish Poetry in the Ghettos and Concentration Camps SUNY Press, 1990.

און מיט הכנעה און מיט ציטער
ליגן מיינע לידער און נאָוועלן;
זיי ליגן און וואַרטן מיט שרעק
ווי אַרעמע לייט אויף רייכע שטעלן

און שעפטשען שטיל. פליסטערן מיט תחנונים
ביז ס'דערהערט זייער מורמלען רב אשי
און הייסט מאַכן אַ וואַרע און ס'ווערט
אויך פֿריינטלעך שלום אַש

...in humility and trembling

Lie my poems and stories,

They lie and wait in fear

Like poor folk for well-paid jobs

And whisper quietly, softly entreat

Till Rav Ashi hears their murmur

And bids "make way!"; friendly too

Is the proud Sholem Asch. (pp. 526-27)

SOME PROFESSIONAL WRITERS IN THE HOLOCAUST

I.

Peysakh Kaplan (1870-1943) - Bialystok, Yiddish-Hebrew journalist, translator, poet; had earlier responded to Kishinev Pogrom

Hillel Zeitlin (1872-1942) - Warsaw, Hebrew-Yiddish philosopher, critic

Mordecai Gebirtig (1877-1942) - Cracow, Yiddish folk bard; *Es brent* (1936) became the unofficial Holocaust hymn

Chaim Kaplan (1880-1942) - Warsaw, Hebrew pedagogue; began his diary in 1933

Hershele [Danielewicz] (1882-1941) - Warsaw, Yiddish folk bard

Oskar Singer - (1883-1944) - Prague-Lodz, German-Jewish journalist, playwright

Oskar Rosenfeld (1884-1944) - Prague-Lodz, German-Jewish writer, journalist, literary critic and translator

Zelig Kalmanovitsh (1885-1944) - Vilna, Yiddish-Hebrew philologist, a founder of YIVO; trans. Dubnow's history, Emil Schürer, Josephus; prescient essays in 1939/40

Yitskhak Katzenelson (1886-1944) - Warsaw, Hebrew-Yiddish poet, playwright; heir of Peretz/Bialik

Shmuel Lehman (1886-1942) - Warsaw, Yiddish ethnographer of WW I

Yehoshue Perle (1888-1944) - Warsaw, popular Yiddish novelist; debut 1908

II.

Abraham Lewin (1893-1943) - Warsaw, Hebrew-Yiddish pedagogue, popular historian: *Kantonistn*

Peretz Opoczynski (1895-1943) - Warsaw, Yiddish-Hebrew journalist; 4 years as POW in Hungary;

Yoysef Kirman (1896-1943) - Warsaw, Yiddish poet about hunger

Herman Kruk (1897-1944) - Vilna, Bundist, Yiddish cultural figure, historian

Naftoli Vaynig (1897-1944) - Vilna, literary critic and essayist; *landkentenish*

Josef Zelkowicz (1897-1944) - Lodz, Yiddish journalist; active service in Polish army; YIVO, ethnographic study about death

III.

Emanuel Ringelblum (1900-1944) - Warsaw, social historian; YIVO, *landkentenish*

Rokhl Auerbach (1903-1976) - Warsaw, Yiddish-Polish journalist; *landkentenish*; close ties to Polish avant-garde

Isaiah Spiegel (1906-1990) - Lodz, Yiddish poet, writer

Leyb Goldin (1906-1942) - Warsaw, Bundist, translator, critic, essayist

Simkhe Bunem Shayevitsh (1907-1944) - Lodz, Yiddish poet, writer; debut 1933

Shmerke Kaczerginski (1908-1954) - Vilna, leftist Yiddish poet; *Yung Vilne*

Shimon Huberband (1909-1942) - Warsaw, religious Zionist; historian

Menakhem Linder (1911-1942) - Vilna, economist;

Leah Rudnitsky (1913-1943) - Vilna, Yiddish poet

Abraham Sutzkever (1913-) - Vilna, Yiddish neoclassical poet; *Yung Vilne*, YIVO

Wladyslaw Szlengel (1914-1943) - Warsaw, Polish topical poet

Leyb Rosental (1916-1945) - Vilna, Yiddish song writer

IV.

Hirsh Glik (1922-1944) - Vilna, Yiddish poet

Bibliography

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Roskies, David G. ed. *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (JPS, 1989).

in *Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community under Siege*, ed. Alan Adelson & Robert Lapidés (New York: Viking, 1989),

[illegible][illegible]

Nom d'un chien, qu'il faisait froid !
 Un brouillard à taper au coucou, un
 vrai brouillard de veille de Noël, ou les
 becs de gaz qu'on venait d'allumer, bien
 qu'il fut à peine quatre heures de l'après-
 midi, ne jetaient que des halos jaunâtres,
 et où les passants — si nombreux fantas-
 tiques — se balançaient sur les trottoirs. Les

[illegible]

Two pages from the unknown boy's diary, written in four languages in the margins and on the endpapers of a French novel. The volume was found at Auschwitz and is now in the Yad Vashem archives.

7/6/1944 [WRITTEN IN ENGLISH]

It is true, the fact has been accomplished, but will we survive? Is it possible to come out of such unimaginable depths, of such an unfathomable abyss?

We are quite at sea about what is taking place, only rumoring and can-arding.

I am very hungry. I have to go 5 days without the bread ration because I finished what I usually do in 3 days. God be in our help.

12/6/1944 [WRITTEN IN YIDDISH]

I dream of being able to tell the world, as much as this is possible, of my suffering. In fact, I should call it our suffering. For never before was suffering so collectively shared as it is for us in the ghetto. After all this writing in many languages, I turn again to my own language, to Yiddish, to our graceful mother tongue, because only in Yiddish will I be able to express my true self, directly and without artificial embellishment. I'm ashamed to think how I've neglected Yiddish, because like it or not, it is my language, and the language of our fathers and grandfathers, mothers and grandmothers. So I shall love Yiddish, because it is mine.

16/6/1944 [WRITTEN IN POLISH]

We are suffering so much. The Eldest has been abused in a barbaric manner by Biebow, so that he had to be taken to the hospital. Again they are getting

31/7/1944 [WRITTEN IN HEBREW]

If we come through this and are still alive, and no longer have to worry only about how to fill our stomachs, then surely the memory of our holy martyrs

will be foremost in our minds: those pure people, the many heroes who died a guiltless martyr's death. We will remember our fathers, relatives, acquaintances who were murdered, starved to death, made to suffer beyond imagining. We will remember those who were buried and burnt alive. We will remember our brethren who were cut into pieces, hanged, roasted, crucified, thrown into water. The Jewish people will remember its heroes, its martyrs who suffered as never have any living creatures on earth. Our only fear now is that they may do with us what they usually do. Because every Jew is a yoke and a burden on their defiled hearts, since they know the joy with which we'd celebrate our second Purim. But maybe they'll be forced to leave our city in panic and confusion, and therefore be unable to do us harm. Yes! These are great and awesome days we pass through now—days in which the wicked are being destroyed, days of ruin, shame, and defeat for the enemy of humanity.

Even though I write poor and dubious Hebrew, I cannot but write in this language because Hebrew is the language of the future, and because in Hebrew we will be proud Jews in *Eretz Israel*.

פון די אויפשריפטן אויף זלמן גראדאָווסקיס פאַרצייכענונגען

Zainteresujcie się tym dokumentem, który zawiera
bogaty materiał dla historyka.

Заинтересуйтесь этим [док]ументом, ибо он [вме]щает
в себя богатый материал для историка.

Interesser vous de ce document parce qu'il contient
un material très important pour l'historien.

Interessieren sie sich [—] Dokument [—]
sehr wichtiges [—] enthalt.

7. YOSSEL RAKOVER'S APPEAL TO GOD

ZVI KOLITZ

Zvi Kolitz, who co-produced Hochhuth's *The Deputy* in New York, has studied the Shoah and its implications for many years. In his quest for meaning, he came to know the story of the Rakovers, a family of Chasidim who were wiped out by the Nazis. And he wondered: How would a Chasid, a pious Jew of Eastern Europe filled with the spirit of men like Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev—how would such a Jew address himself to God at this time? There is no actual document written by Yossel Rakover. But there was a Yossel Rakover who died in the flames. And there is the tradition of those who trust in God though He slay them. And Kolitz's reconstruction of the last thoughts of a pious Jew has become a small classic which has been utilized in the Yom Kippur liturgy of university students at Yale and elsewhere. If we say with Zvi Kolitz that Jews did pray in this manner in those final days, one question remains: Can we, the survivors, pray in the same manner?

I die peacefully, but not complacently; persecuted, but not enslaved; embittered, but not cynical; a believer, but not a supplicant; a lover of God, but no blind amen-sayer of His.

I have followed Him even when He rejected me. I have followed His commandments even when He castigated me for it; I have loved Him and I love Him even when He hurls me to the earth, tortures me to death, makes me an object of shame and ridicule.

My rabbi would frequently tell the story of a Jew who fled from the Spanish Inquisition with his wife and child, striking out in a small boat over the stormy sea until he reached a rocky island where a flash of lightning killed his wife; a storm rose and hurled his son into the sea. Then, as lonely as a stone, naked, barefoot, lashed by the storm and terrified by the thunder and the lightning, hands turned up to God, the Jew, setting out on his journey through the wastes of the island, turned to his Maker with the following words:

God of Israel, I have fled to this place in order to worship You without molestation, to obey Your commandments and sanctify Your name. You, however, have done everything to make me stop believing in You. Now lest it seem to You that You will succeed by these tribulations to drive me from the right path, I notify You, my God and the God of my father, *that it will not avail You in the least!* You may insult me, You may castigate me, You may take from me all that I cherish and hold dear in the world, You may torture me to death—I shall believe in *You*, I shall love You no matter what You do to test me!

And these are my last words to You, my wrathful God: nothing will avail You in the least. You have done everything to make me renounce You, to make me lose my faith in You, but I die exactly as I have lived, a *believer!*

Eternally praised be the God of the dead, the God of vengeance, of truth and of law, Who will soon show His face to the world again and shake its foundations with His almighty voice.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One.

Into your hands, O Lord, I consign my soul.

גלוסט זיך מיר צו טאן א תפילה

גלוסט זיך מיר צו טאן א תפילה — ווייס איך ניט צו וועמען,
דער, וואס האט א מאל געטרייטט מיר, וועט זי ניט פארנעמען,
ווייס איך ניט צו וועמען —
האלט זי מיר אין קלעמען.

אפשר זאל איך בעטן ביי א שטערן: "פריינד מיין וועטער,
כיהאב מיין ווארט פארלוירן, קום און זי אים א פארבייטער וי
אויך דער גוטער שטערן
וועט עס ניט דערהערן.

גאר א תפילה זאגן מוז איך, עמעץ גאר א נאנטער
פריינט זיך אין מיין נשמה און די תפילה מאנט ער, —
וועל איך אן א זינען
פלאפלען ביז באגינען.

ווינער נעמט, 17טן יאנואר 1942

Yitzhak Katzenelson

קומט יידן טייערע
גיסט צוזאמען מיט די אלטע די פרישע אייערע —
די טרערן,
די נייע אייערע די קלאג, 115
די פיין פון לעצטן טאג —
זיי וועלן אין תנ"ך ניט אויסגערוגען ווערן!
זיי בלייבן אייביק!
[און א פאראייביקטע א לייד]
איז פרייד [!]
א פאראייביקטע א פיין —
איז שיין!

קומט אומגלייביקע איר יידן, קומט און ווערט
ביים תנ"ך, ביי אייערן דא גלייביק!
גלייבט: די וואס שאפן אייביקייטן אויף דער ערד —
זענען אויף דער ערד דא אייביק!
125

ווארשא

26/XI/1940

Pray

I think I just thought of a prayer,
But I can't imagine who might be there.
Sealed in a steel womb,
How can I pray? To whom?

Star, you were once my dear friend,
Come, stand for the words that have come to an end.

But dear, deaf star,
I understand, you're too far.

Still, someone in me insists: pray!
Tormenting me in my soul: pray!
Prayer, oh wildest surmise,
I still babble you till sunrise.

Vilna ghetto, January 17, 1942

c. K. Williams

עפענונג צו א תנ"ך-אווונט

תנ"ך!
דער ערשטער אוונט פון תנ"ך —
געדענקט די דאטע!
איר זענט געקומען מידע, מאטע,
מיט א טרער אין אויג און מיט א וויי אין הארצן —
מען קען, הפנים, ניט פון זיי אנטלויפן...
ווערן איר קומט — קומען מיט, מיט אייך, די שמארצן!
היינט, נאענטע מינע, ברידער, שוועסטער טייערע,
היינט וועט איר זיי פארקויפן,
היינט אויף דעם אוונט פון [תנ"ך] —
תנ"ך!

ס'איז אונדזער אלטע פעסטונג!
צווישן אלע פעסטונגען די שטארקסטע און די גרעסטע!
קוקט זיך צו, הערט צו זיך און דערקענט:
די דעם תנ"ך,
די פעסטונג!
דער הימל איז איר דאך —
די פיר עקן וועלט — די וועלט,
די ערד איז איר יסוד —
20 און כאטש מען זעט אים ניט, איר הארן,
דעם הערשער אירן —
אין יעדן ווינקל דארט, אין יעדער שפארע
וועט איר דערפילן און דערשפירן —
גאט!

POLISH-JEWISH RELATIONS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

When a *sofer*—[Jewish] scribe—sets out to copy the Torah (the Pentateuch), he must, according to religious law, take a ritual bath in order to purify himself of all uncleanness and impurity. This scribe takes up his pen with a trembling heart, because the smallest mistake in transcription means the destruction of the whole work. It is with this feeling of fearfulness that I have begun this work with the above title. I am writing it in a hide-out on the Aryan side. I am indebted to the Poles for having saved my life twice during this war: once, in the winter of 1940, when the blessed arm of the Polish Underground saved me from certain death, and the second time when it got me out of an S.S. labour camp, where I would have met my death either in an epidemic or from a Ukrainian or S.S. bullet.¹ I, in my own person, am concrete evidence of the lack of truth in the assertion made by

some Jewish circles that the whole Polish population rejoiced over the destruction of Polish Jewry and that there are no people on the Aryan side with hearts that bleed and suffer over the tragic fate of the Jewish people in Poland.² On the other hand, Polish circles may be hurt when I say that Poland did not reach the same level as Western Europe in saving Jews. I am a historian. Before the war I published several works on the history of the Jews in Poland. It is my wish to write objectively, *sine ira et studio*, on the problem of Polish-Jewish relations during the present war. In times so tragic for my people, however, it is no easy task to rise above passion and maintain cool objectivity.

¹ On 19 November 1940 Ringelblum noted down that a letter denouncing him to the Gestapo had come into the hands of two Polish workers in the Post Office, who told him that they had prevented the letter from reaching its destination. After this, Ringelblum went into hiding for a time. (Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Ktovim fun geto, Vol. I (Togbuch fun Warsheyer geto)*, Warsaw 1961, p. 183.)

At the beginning of August 1943, Ringelblum was got out of the Trawniki concentration camp and brought to Warsaw by a regular courier and envoy of the Council for Aid to the Jews, the Polish railway worker Teodor Pajewski, and a brave young Jewish girl, "Emilka" (Shoshana Kosower).

(Rahel Auerbach, *Bemehyazato shel Dr. Ringelblum*, in "Enziqlopediya shel galuyot Warsha". Part Two, Jerusalem, 1959, p. 351.

Batya Temkin—Berman, *Pan Rydzewski—yemaw ha'aharonim shel Ringelblum*, in "Yalkut Moreshet," No. 2, May 1964, p. 14.

Trans. from Polish ; ed. Joseph Kermish & Shmuel Krakowski
Jerusalem: Yad Vashem 1974