

3080 Broadway
New York, NY 10027
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Ms. Bonnie Fetterman
Schocken Books
201 E. 50th Street
New York, NY 10022

Dear Bonnie,

Just got back from two incredible weeks teaching Yiddish literature in Kiev. One of the more amazing things was a long conversation I had with Shloyme Kolikov, a 42-year-old archeologist who lives in Moscow but was visiting his mother in Kiev. He talked about the need for a sophisticated basic Jewish library in the Russian language in terms that were identical to those of our discussion. The only difference was his very modest housing as compared with André's. Also his mother's cooking was strictly vegetarian.

Among my many other meetings was one with Michael Tupailo, a senior editor at the Dnipro Publishing House, Weadimirskaja 42, Kiev. He asked for a complete set of Agnon in Hebrew and wants permission to put out an anthology of Agnon's writings in Ukrainian. He himself is a polyglot translator from Hebrew, Yiddish, English and probably some other languages as well. They've just launched a series of translations of Jewish books and Agnon is a top priority. Is there anything you can do for the man?

Now you ask why a new translation of The Dybbuk is needed. Simply because the two existing translations are unperformable. They stick slavishly to the Judaic terminology and bookish locutions of the original so as to create a totally artificial effect. This scholarly transletese works well only when the Miropolyer Rebbe or Rabbi Shmishon are rendering a halachic ruling or are otherwise engaged in formal discourse, but it is deadly when there is real dialogue going on. Thus, to cite a concrete example from the pages I sent you: Landis has the First Batlon say: "I laugh at you and your rabbinical authority." Engel renders it "I don't care a hoot for you or your decisions." Can you imagine a living actor speaking these lines on a living stage? Werman's version is "I don't give a fig for you or for your rabbinical judgments," which is accurate, colloquial and has a dramatic rhythm. I can multiply these examples a hundredfold.

The other reason for a new translation is in terms of marketability. It means that almost everything, including the most famous work in the Ansky volume, will be translated anew for the contemporary reader. As I wrote you earlier, I'm dropping Neugroschel altogether, so the reader will move from Ansky's theoretical pronouncements about Jewish folklore directly to his most brilliant creative appropriation thereof.

Finally let me say that I am finding this business of writing and rewriting the proposal and rationale rather tiresome. At a certain point someone other than me's gotta go to bat for the project. You are welcome to show your marketing specialists two thirds of the manuscript, which is already complete. If this keeps up much longer I will lose all desire to work for the trade and will happily return to my closeted academic life -- even it means forfeiting free Chinese kosher meals.

Yours,