

Yiddish Literature in Translation

Hibru by Joseph Opatoshu: Musings on Translation

Shulamith (Shuli) Z. Berger

Description: Yiddish literature is being widely translated into English today. For example, the new Norton anthology *Have I Got a Story for You: More Than a Century of Fiction from The Forward* showcases a wide range of Yiddish literary offerings translated by some of today's leading Yiddish translators. A plethora of translated full-length volumes by Yiddish writers have also appeared recently. This session will provide case studies of three distinguished Yiddish writers - Blume Lempel, Yenta Mash, and Joseph Opatoshu - and the efforts to render their writing into English. Focus will be given to the author's lives, their oeuvre as a whole, and narrative strategies as well as the translators' overall selection and translation process.

Shulamith (Shuli) Z. Berger is Curator of Special Collections and Hebraica-Judaica at the Mendel Gottesman Library, Yeshiva University, New York, NY. She speaks at AJL conferences and for Jewish groups in the New York area on topics related to American Jewish immigrant history, such as history of American Yiddish advertising and architectural history of the Lower East Side. She blogs at the Yeshiva University Libraries website, <http://blogs.yu.edu/library/>. She was a 2015 Translation Fellow at the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA.

Some of you may recall that last year I spoke about my experience as a translation fellow at the Yiddish Book Center, working on a translation of the novel *Hibru* (which is in Yiddish, despite its title) by Joseph Opatoshu – this is a continuation of that talk, and I'd like to thank Ahron Taub of Library of Congress and Ellen Cassedy, who was my *chevrusa*, my study partner at the Yiddish Book Center for inviting me to join them at this session.

What is my interest in *Hibru*? Why translate it?

I first read *Hibru* when I was in graduate school studying American Jewish history. I was fascinated by it from a historical perspective since it addressed significant issues in American Jewish life of the time it was written. I re-read the novel a few years ago and still felt that it reads as though it was written as

a documentary account of certain aspects of Jewish life on the Lower East Side a century ago. This inspired me to work on a translation.

Hibru is set on the Lower East Side of New York in the 1910s. The title, *Hibru*, refers to Hebrew teachers in afternoon Jewish studies schools for boys, generally known as “Hebrew schools” or “Talmud Torahs,” which students attended after the end of the public school day to receive a Jewish education and prepare for becoming *bar-mitzveh*. The novel depicts the professional and personal lives of the teachers, young immigrant men, many with literary aspirations, who wander like lost, tormented souls in the land of opportunity seeking livelihood and love. The students, immigrants and children of immigrants, are primarily sons of shop workers, and the gap between students and teachers seems unbridgeable. Most of the teachers hate teaching and their students equally despise their teachers and the Hebrew school.

The novel brings to life the ambitions and frustrations, both personal and professional, of the teachers. Unlike many characterizations of life on the Lower East Side, which stress the travails of the tenements and sweatshops, *Hibru* focuses on educated, intellectually oriented immigrants and the challenges they faced adjusting to life in America. It brings many historical issues of the day to life which have not been addressed in fiction in a lively, entertaining manner – Yiddish versus Hebrew in Jewish education, the future of Judaism and Jewish education in America, different paths pursued by immigrant intellectuals in order to make a living, labor strife in Hebrew schools, and the social life of young men and women on the Lower East Side, among others. I was also intrigued since although the novel was fiction, it was practically painting reality, the grittiness of the streets, the night life of the cafes, a reality which many historians struggle to depict and here it played out almost as though I was watching a movie of the Lower East Side, so cinematic was Opatoshu’s work. These topics and characteristics distinguish *Hibru* from other works, both Yiddish and English, which portray immigrant life in New York, and explain why I selected this novel to translate.

The description of the book is also a depiction in brief, of the author Joseph Opatoshu’s life in America as a young immigrant and the setting he lived in.

[slide – card game]

Joseph Opatoshu was born in 1886 in the Stupsker Vald, near Mława (Mława), Poland. His father, Dovid, a lumber merchant, was a descendant of a line of Polish Hassidic rabbis; he was also one of the first Maskilim [enlightened Jews] in Poland and wrote poetry in Hebrew. His mother, Nantshe, loved to tell stories and came from generations of forester Jews, who lived and made a living from the forest, and was born and raised in the woods. At age twelve he graduated from Russian public school. Together with his older brother, Fayvl he studied Hebrew, Bible, and Talmud with his father. At age fifteen, he entered a trade school in Warsaw, and at age nineteen he left for Nancy, France, where he studied engineering in the local polytechnic. Early in 1907 he emigrated to the United States and settled in New York. He worked at first in a factory, then delivered English newspapers and later became a teacher in a Jewish elementary school. He studied at Cooper Union in the evenings, and graduated in 1914 with a degree in civil engineering. That same year the Yiddish daily, *Der Tog*, was founded. Opatoshu joined the staff in 1914 and wrote a short story every week for the newspaper until his death in New York in 1954.

[slide – In Poylishe Velder]

Hibru was a work written by Opatoshu very early in his career. *Hibru* was almost unanimously trashed by the reviewers – I had the privilege of being able to look at Opatoshu's papers at the YIVO Archives here in New York. The archival material is not that extensive, and I didn't find what I was hoping to find – a manuscript of the novel *Hibru* - but Opatoshu kept copies of critical review after critical review of the novel *Hibru*. Despite this difficult beginning Opatoshu went on to a major literary career and became a Jewish intellectual figure, his most famous and best received novel, *In Poylishe Velder* [*In Polish Woods*] is set in Poland in the 1850s. The main character is young Mordechai who breaks from his Hassidic background to lead a peasant revolution. It was written almost simultaneously with the novel *Hibru*, thus Opatoshu he had both his greatest failure and his greatest success within a year of one another. After his death in 1954 he became something of an obscure figure though he is featured in a literary card game.

Recently Opatoshu has been making a comeback – a conference devoted to Opatoshu took place in 2012 and a book was published based on the conference.

[slide – cover of book]

One of the essays in the conference volume describes Opatoshu’s innovation as a Yiddish writer:

“a new type of Jewish character: young, active, willful, and energetic, ready to break established social norms and cultural conventions, and sometimes even the law.” [description from the chapter “Joseph Opatoshu’s Search for Yidishkayt” by Gennady Estraiikh, Sabine Koller, and Mikhail Krutikov in *Joseph Opatoshu: a Yiddish Writer Between Europe and America*,” edited by Sabine Koller, Gennady Estraiikh, and Mikhail Krutikov. London: Legenda, 2013.]

A reader might wonder: how is a book about Hebrew teachers related to “breaking social norms?” In the novel, the Hebrew teachers are not religious and do not observe the Sabbath, *Shabes*, although they teach in religious, Orthodox, afternoon schools – known as Talmud Torahs or Hebrew [“Hibru”] schools. One teacher even becomes a Christian missionary, so the teachers certainly do not lead the type of lives expected of teachers in a religious school. These teachers pretend to be religious, and are teaching in order to earn a living; in most cases they are unable or incapable of doing anything else. They are immigrants with limited language skills and opportunities. The characters in the novel *Hibru* are not sympathetic ones. This was one reason the novel was criticized, and it was also critiqued for not being a novel – which is true in a sense – it is really a series of vignettes about the same characters, strung together, and each chapter can almost stand independently. It is also possible that there was something of a personal aspect to the criticism, since the personalities in the novel may well be based on or be composites of actual figures of the day, who may have taken offense at the characterizations.

[slide – *Di Naye Velt*]

The novel was originally appeared as a serial in *Di Naye Velt*, a weekly Socialist newspaper which published one chapter a week during 1918 and 1919, under the title: *Lehrer*. The subtitle: “*ertseylung fun dem lebn fun der yiddisher boheme*” = “*stories of the Yiddish / Jewish bohemians*” – indeed describes the lifestyle of some of the teachers. The serialization may explain the episodic nature of the work.

[slide – *Morim*]

Despite the later criticism, the work must have been deemed to have general interest and value, since the serialized chapters were translated into Hebrew by Mordechai Lipson and published as a complete novel in 1918 by Ha-Ivri press under the title *Morim* [*Teachers*] – almost simultaneously with its appearance as a serial in the Yiddish press. The novel was published in its entirety in Hebrew translation before it was printed as a complete work in Yiddish. The slide shows the cover of the Hebrew novel in different colors.

The novel was first published in its entirety in Yiddish in New York in 1920 by the Max Mayzel publishing company.

[slide – *Hibru* – New York edition]

The novel was next published in Berlin in 1922 under yet another title: *Farloyrene menshn: a roman fun' m Yidishn lebn in Amerike* = *Lost people – a novel of Jewish life in America*, by the Juedischer Literarischer Verlag. This edition states that it was not for sale in the United States.

The novel's final publication in Yiddish was in 1928, in Opatoshu's collected works issued by the Kletskin Press, in Vilna, under title *Hibru*. The book has a handsome cover, with an engraved medallion of Opatoshu, as do the other volumes in the series.

[slide – cover with medallion]

The variety of titles and subtitles may indicate Opatoshu's own efforts to grapple with the nature of this particular work, and his differing visions of the main theme of the novel.

I am going to tell the story of the main character in the novel and read short excerpts from the novel, from my English translation. The main actor in the novel is the principal of the Hebrew school, an unhappy, angry, miserable man named Friedkin. Friedkin is a bachelor and this status plays a role in the story. Friedkin thinks very highly of himself and for whatever psychological reasons, he is abusive to many women he meets. Here is an example:

“Were you born here, in America?”

“No, in *Galitsya*.”

“Are you a *Galitsynaer*? He acted as though it was news to him. You say, *gaayn*, *Itshe Mayer iz geshtorbn*.”

One reason I brought this example – in addition to shedding light on Friedkin’s character - is also to point out a translation issue – all the examples the *Litvak* [Lithuanian Jew] Friedkin uses to belittle the *Galitsyaner* young woman are dialect – is there a way to translate them into English? They are essentially pointing out differences between two Yiddish dialects. *Gaayn = geyn* – illustrates an issue of pronunciation of vowels, while the example of *Itshe Mayer iz geshtorbn* indicates a grammatical dialectical difference – most Yiddish speakers would say “*hat geshtorbn*.” I haven’t really come up with a solution. Friedkin is trying to say that the *Galitsyaner* form of speech is low class. What to do – use a low class accent? Change the words? E.g. *Galitsyaners* say ‘tirty-tird’ street? But that would actually imply that anyone with a *Galitsyaner* accent is low class. Is there a way to indicate that the accent is simply different? One possibility is to use examples a contemporary audience might be familiar with, e.g. kugel, keegel, or potayto kugel, potahto keegel. And in that case they must be visual as well; they must be examples which are easily readable and understandable. I still have not come up with a good solution. Another possibility is to transliterate the original Yiddish and assume people will understand it or use footnotes, but that will not necessarily work either and is cumbersome.

In addition, not everything is as it seems in this novel: Friedkin is indeed somewhat prejudiced but he is exaggerating it here and using the linguistic aspect as an excuse use to torment someone.

Then there are cases where the words are understandable in a literal sense but something is awry in a logical sense. This is a description of a room in the apartment of Ziskind, one of the teachers, and a friend of Friedkin's:

“Two gas flames flickered, as though they were about to go out, and cast a dirty light on the room. Reproductions of Madonnas hung on the walls, a sight often seen in the bedrooms of young men and women, former members of the Party.”

Where does “reproductions of Madonna” fit in? Even assuming the teacher is an ex-Communist – why Madonnas? In this particular case, the teacher, Ziskind, eventually becomes a missionary so it makes sense – but was it really something common, as Opatoshu implies? So far I have not been able to figure it out, and it would be helpful to have more context.

Ziskind's apostasy greatly unsettles Friedkin, although Friedkin himself was not a man of faith. Friedkin is surprised by how disturbed he is and starts reading the New Testament to try to understand what Ziskind sees in it. This is the first intellectual challenge he has set for himself in years. Friedkin comes to a *modus vivendi* regarding religion and realizes that even though he is not a believer and does not keep the Sabbath, he is a committed Jew, and even, for example, if he lived in a time or place where it would be dangerous to circumcise a son, he would nonetheless have him ritually circumcised. It is possible that these internal deliberations may have reverberated with Opatoshu since his son David was born around this time in 1918.

Chapter 13 of the novel, the chapter immediately following the crisis with Ziskind, turns to Friedkin's personal crisis: his girlfriend Shoshana's [a.k.a. Reyzele] unwelcome revelation that she is pregnant and her traumatic story of her survival of the Kishinev pogrom. In the novel up to this point she is known as Shoshana but in this chapter, where she describes living through the pogrom, she refers to herself as Reyzele – the Yiddish name she grew up with rather than the Hebrew name she adopted when she went to the Land of

Israel as an orphan after the pogrom. Now in New York, she maintains the Hebraic identity she adopted and uses the name Shoshana. This is a translation issue, since I am not sure if it will be obvious to the reader that when Shoshana describes Reyzele's experiences, she is speaking about herself. I believe an astute reader will understand that Shoshana and Reyzele are one and the same person.

This chapter, Chapter 13, was the one I submitted as one of the requirements of the fellowship to the *Pakn-Treger*, the magazine of the Yiddish Book Center. The chapter is online at the Yiddish Book Center website in case anyone wants to read the entire chapter. Although the chapters in Opatoshu's book are numbered and do not have titles, this chapter needed a title since it was being published on its own, almost as a short story. I provided the title: "Mr. Friedkin and Shoshana: Wandering Souls on the Lower East Side."

[slide – Yiddish Book Center – Shoshana - Friedkin slide]

Explanation of the title:

I realized that throughout the entire book, we never find out Friedkin's first name, nor do we find out Shoshana's last name; for a boyfriend and girlfriend about to have a baby, it seems rather odd. The subtitle is derived from one of Opatoshu's titles for the novel: "*farloyrene menshn*" = "Lost people/souls," since figuratively and literally, they wandered around the world, from Eastern Europe to Israel to New York for Shoshana, and from Eastern Europe to New York for Friedkin, and they are always wandering around the streets of the Lower East Side, going about their daily routines but also seeking entertainment, happiness, and love.

The story continues:

Shoshana pressures Friedkin to get married. Friedkin tries to escape his fate. He feels as though a noose is being tied around his neck and has a constant litany of questions: is Shoshana if sure she's pregnant, did a doctor confirm it, is the baby his? He continually postpones the wedding; still certain he will find a better match and mate than Shoshana. As fate would have it, Friedkin suffers his own personal tragedy, his own form of a pogrom, which he helped bring on himself by scabbing during a strike in the Hebrew school.

The strike: a selection from the depiction of the denizens of the synagogue, who seem somewhat self-righteous, regarding the strike in the Talmud Torah (Hebrew School) sponsored by their synagogue:

The elderly Jews left the synagogue one at a time, remained standing in a small group, each one in another place, and talked quietly among themselves,

“After all, it’s a disgrace,” said an elderly man, whose son, a pants-worker, was on strike at the very same time, “we can’t allow a strike in a Talmud Torah.”

“What, cave in to them?” stated a small Lithuanian Jew, a former boss of a vest factory who entered the group, “I’ve been saying for a long time, that we mustn’t let clean-shaven teachers in the Machzike Torah! If a Jew is clean-shaven, who will guarantee that he doesn’t desecrate the Shabes [Sabbath]? That someone who is clean-shaven should guide my child! No, sir!”

“Don’t start up!” A few elderly men suddenly lifted their heads, and their trimmed beards stood up like brooms, “after all, it’s America!”

Perhaps not everything is as it seems – these men appear religious, but are they? They are self-righteous and hypocritical: only workers are allowed to strike, but teachers must not. And the identification of one of the speakers as a former factory boss is presumably to imply that he may have mistreated workers himself.

What happened to Friedkin during the strike? All the teachers at the Hebrew School went on strike, but Friedkin acceded to the personal request of the president of the Hebrew School. Friedkin becomes a scab; he breaks the strike, goes to school, and teaches. The president of the Hebrew School, Mr. Schultz, owns a car and drives Friedkin home after school to protect him, and even offers to accompany him up to his apartment. Friedkin refused the offer, since he did not want the president to go upstairs and see that he, Friedkin, ostensibly a bachelor, is living with Shoshana and that she is pregnant. By this point in the narrative Friedkin has moved in with Shoshana, but they are not married. During the short walk from the president’s car to his apartment, hired thugs beat Friedkin up and a policeman goes looking for Shoshana. This is the scene:

Friedkin looked at all of them through unblinking eyes, didn’t understand what was happening, even though he heard every word. Soon a policeman pushed through the crowd, asked some questions, and searched the victim. He

rummaged through all his pockets, took out whatever was there, and wrapped everything in Friedkin's handkerchief. He took a fountain pen with a silver cover out of Friedkin's vest pocket, looked at it approvingly, and he stuck it in his chest-pocket.

Someone found a letter addressed to the building where they were standing, and the policeman took the letter and went from apartment to apartment. A neighbor pointed to Shoshana's door, and the policeman knocked,

"Does Mr. Friedkin live here?"

"Yes," Shoshana saw the policeman, stuck out her head, and started to arrange her hair.

"Is he at home?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"He's supposed to come any minute."

"Close the door and come down with me."

"What is it?" she opened her eyes and instinctively felt the top of her dress to check if it was open, "did something happen to Mr. Friedkin?"

The policeman didn't answer, elbowed the bystanders aside, and led her to Friedkin.

"Do you recognize him?"

"Friedkin!" Shoshana screamed. Her head swayed and the people in the crowd caught her.

So even in this extreme situation, Shoshana still called him Friedkin.

A few months later, towards the end of the book, Friedkin and Shoshana are walking together and run into Green, Friedkin's former colleague in the Hebrew school. Green had been Friedkin's nemesis; both had vied for the position as principal of the Hebrew School.

This is their conversation:

“Don’t I know you?” Green stopped Friedkin.

“Mr. Green!” Friedkin stretched out his hands happily, dropped his umbrella, bent down for it; he looked like a spider. “Don’t you know Mrs. Friedkin? Let me introduce you. Mr. Green, my wife...”

“What, were you sick?”

“So he really doesn’t know!” Friedkin nudged his wife with his elbow and made such a face that Green would never have known he was in New York, “You know there was a strike in the “Machzike.” The group from the Land of Israel hired a gangster and he beat me to a pulp. What should I tell you, if not for her,” he pointed at Shoshana with his umbrella, “it would have been ‘good-bye’ Friedkin!

“And how do you make a living?”

“It’s really hard, we struggle. For now I’m a dues collector for the “Machzike” I get new members, I teach a *bar-mitzveh* boy, somehow we make do. I, you should understand, am not like the *shames*, the synagogue assistant who used to go collect. The entire neighborhood around here knows me and when I approach someone, he can’t turn me down, and he becomes a member. As you can see, it would be bearable, but there’s another problem, since I got up from my sickbed I have a tendency to faint, and my wife,” he pointed to her, “is expecting and can’t go everywhere with me, but if not for her, God alone knows, what would I have done?”

“So, you manage?”

“The president should live like I do!” Friedkin coughed, grew red, spit into a handkerchief and satisfied, showed it to Green, “you see?”

Green said good-bye to them, took Friedkin's address, and heard them calling after him,

"Come to us Friday night for fish!"

"Don't be a stranger!"

The fish reference is something that is difficult to translate but fortunately it was explained in context earlier in the novel. Green and Friedkin were both guests at the home of Mr. Schultz, president of the Hebrew School, for a Friday night Sabbath dinner when Friedkin got drunk and made fun of Green. The background of the source of the fun is that Polish Jews eat sweet Gefilte fish; Lithuanian Jews eat peppery Gefilte fish, so there is a difference between Polish and Lithuanian styles of fish.

"You're Polish, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"So you eat fish with sugar!" Friedkin laughed shrilly until he had tears in his eyes. He made a peculiar face, as though Green had eaten flies, instead of sweet fish.

Everyone looked at one another and shrugged their shoulders. Friedkin was non-plussed; he realized he had said something foolish. He sat, his eyes were dull, like a near-sighted person who took off his glasses.

And the biggest translation problem of all is the title - Opatoshu himself used several, as noted at the beginning of the paper: *Teachers (Morim and Lerer)*, *Hibru* which can refer to Hebrew teachers or Hebrew school (transliterated as *Hibru* to visually indicate that it is pronounced with an accent). None of these are particularly appealing in English, at least to my mind. If it is ever published, would anyone buy a novel with the title *Teachers* or *Hebrew teachers*? The subtitle: "Wandering Souls in New York" sounds depressing. Jewish Bohemians? School daze? Lost in translation on the Lower East Side?

All sound too flippant. One possibility is using a phrase which is repeated several times in the book that in order to make in in America “Ya gotta yell over the ell.” So my latest thought is: *Ya Gotta Yell Over the El*, like this young man **in the slide** on an ad for a bike featuring Canal Street, one of the frequent haunts of the café-going teachers.

Presented by Shulamith Z. Berger at the Association of Jewish Libraries conference, New York, June 2017

Shulamith Z. Berger would like to thank Dan Opatoshu for permission to translate and publish the novel *Hibru* by Joseph Opatoshu.