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“Fartaytsht un farbesert”: Wolf Biermann and Yitskhok Katsenelson’s *Dos lid funem oysgehargetn yidishn folk*

Abstract

In this essay we offer a preliminary discussion of Biermann’s phenomenally successful rendering of Katsenelson’s elegy. First, we place Biermann’s attempt in a wider historical and biographical context to throw some light on his motivation to grapple with the text written in a language he did not know (Yiddish) and thus was forced to rely on a literal version provided by a native speaker. Second, we provide some examples from the work in question of Biermann’s more general attitude to translation, as epitomized by the Yiddish phrase he likes to quote: ‘fartaytsht un farbesert’ (translated and improved). We conclude that Biermann’s adaptation should be assessed first of all as an act of cross-cultural communication rather than according to the criteria of strictly textual equivalence.

Keywords: Yiddish poetry, translation, Katsenelson, Biermann, *Dos lid funem oysgehargetn yidishn folk*.

Wolf Biermann is a special phenomenon in the context of German literature; the same can be said about Yitskhok Katsenelson¹ in the field of Yiddish literature. In both cases one can observe a strong longing for identity which has found a unique

¹ In our paper we use the YIVO transcription of Yiddish. In references, Katsenelson’s name has various accepted transcriptions. On Katsenelson see: W. Biermann, *Jizhak Katzenelson, ein Jude* [in:] J. Katzenelson, *Dos lied vunem oysgehargetn jidischn volk. Großer Gesang vom ausgerotteten jüdischen Volk [aus dem Jiddischen übersetzt von Wolf Biermann]*, Köln 1994, p. 7–29; M. Cohen, *Biographical Notes*, [in:] Y. Katzenelson, *Vittel Diary*, transl. from the Hebrew M. Cohen, Tel-Aviv 1964, p. 9–40; J. Ficowski, *Słowo o Icchaku Kacenzelonie* [in:] I. Kacenzel, *Icehak: Pieśń o zamordowanym żydowskim narodzie*, transl., introduction, notes J. Ficowski, Warszawa 1982, p. 6–11; T. Katsenelson-Nakhumov, *Yitskhok Katzenelson*, Buenos-Ayres 1948; A. Pawelec, M. Sitarz, *Ostatni Żyd w Europie*, “Zeszyty Naukowe Centrum Badań im. Edyty Stein” 2014, no 12, p. 203–220; A. Pawelec, M. Sitarz, *Lekcja martwego języka: “Pieśń o zamordowanym żydowskim narodzie” Jicchoka Kacenzelona*, “Wkład w Przekład” 2015, 3, p. 115–127; Y. Szeintuch, *The Warsaw Writings of Yitzhak Katzenelson (1940–1943)* [in:] Y. Katzenelson, *Yidische geto-ksovim*, ed. Y. Szeintuch, Tel-Aviv, p. III–X;

literary expression: both have tried, with the resources available to them, to bear witness to the tradition and the fate of their people and to exert influence on their readers. What connects the two poets is Biermann's translation of Katsenelson's world-famous elegy.

First, we want to briefly mention Katsenelson's and Biermann's² search for their own identity, then we will focus on the quality of the translation of Yitskhok Katsenelson's *Dos lid funem oysgehargetn yidishn folk* (Song of the Murdered Yiddish People). In his own words, Biermann – full of good intentions – ‘fartaytsht un farbesert’ Katsenelson's ‘last song’. We want to investigate in this paper the significance of this translatorial stance.

Yitskhok Katsenelson יצחק קאצענעלסן was born on July 1st, 1886 in Korelicze near Nowogródek and was murdered in Auschwitz on May 1st, 1944. He was a poet and playwright creating in Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as a teacher and translator.

The world knows him, if at all, only from one single text, *Dos lid funem oysgehargetn yidishn folk*. In Poland there exists a solemn poetic translation prepared by Jerzy Ficowski³, who translated *Dos lid...* in 1973, dedicating his work “naszym braciom Żydom polskim w czterdziestą rocznicę ich walki w warszawskim getcie” (to our brothers Polish Jews on the fortieth anniversary of their struggle in the Warsaw Ghetto).⁴ Due to the political situation the Polish version of *Dos lid...* waited nine years before it could be published.

Katsenelson's song which represents one of the most outstanding literary accounts of the Shoah and is perceived as a work of global importance, is an epic poem in fifteen cantos written down from October 3rd, 1943 to January 18th, 1944 during the poet's stay in a German POW camp in Vittel, France.

The cantos oscillate between lyrical confession of pain felt by a man who had lost almost all his family and friends, epic accounts of an eyewitness to the crime, and even a kind of one-act drama in the fifth canto which deals with the suicide of Adam Czerniaków.⁵

It is hard to tell which parts of the poem are more shocking: the more lyrical first cantos, crammed into a poetic frame of regular stanzas and rhymes, as if in

² On Wolf Biermann as a poet and translator see: W. Biermann, *Katzenelson, der Jid (oder über die Arbeit des Übersetzers)* [in:] J. Katzenelson, *Dos lied vunem ojsgehargetn jidischn volk. Großer Gesang vom ausgerotteten jüdischen Volk*, Köln 1994, p. 197–226; P. Davies, “Die Juden schiessen!” *Translations by Hermann Adler and Wolf Biermann of Yitzhak Katzenelson's Epic Poem of the Warsaw Ghetto*, “Modern Language Review” 2014, no 109(3), p. 708–725; M. Sitarz, *Wolf Biermann: deutsch-jüdischer Dichter und Übersetzer* [in:] *Begegnungen zwischen der Ukraine und den deutschsprachigen Ländern in Literatur, Sprache und Kultur. XX. UDGV-Tagung*, eds. A. Paslowska u.a., Lwiw, p. 230–232.

³ Jerzy Tadeusz Ficowski (1924–2006), Polish poet, essayist, songwriter, novelist, translator, a soldier of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), a participant of the Warsaw Uprising.

⁴ I. Kacnelson, *Pieśń o zamordowanym żydowskim narodzie*, transl., introduction, notes J. Ficowski, Warszawa 1982., p. 5.

⁵ Adam Czerniaków (30.11.1880–23.07.1942) an engineer, Senator of the Polish Second Republic, columnist, author of occasional poems in Polish, during the German occupation of Poland the president of the Judenrat in the Warsaw ghetto.

defiance of the havoc prevailing around as well as daily fear and uncertainty, in which the poet gives voice to the dead, or the subsequent ones in which the poet – probably writing under increasing pressure and asking the question: do I have enough time? – builds longer and longer lines with less and less perceptible rhymes, wanting to tell everything, not miss anyone, to ultimately express his pain.

It seems that Katsenelson found his identity of the East-European Jew while working with children, which were particularly important for him. For them he wrote before the war, he visited them in the ghetto orphanages and taught them in an underground school. He wrote songs and plays for children, trying to uphold their spirit in the hours of doom.⁶ The children from the orphanages are mentioned in two of the fifteen cantos of *Dos lid...* First in the sixth one *They first*, then the same theme returns in the eleventh canto, *Remember?*, in which the poet speaks to his murdered wife and mentions among other things a visit to an abandoned orphanage after the deportation. Also in the diary from Vittel, written directly before *Dos lid...*, the poet remembers his beloved children: “They dragged them on, on towards the slaughter. Yes, these young children, tender, pure, our hope, our future, our very best, our messiahs, our saviours! [...] They were the Jewish children of Lithuania, Volhynia and Poland! They had the humility of Moses, the man of God”.⁷

Katsenelson was close to the Zionist ideals, in the interwar period he wrote primarily in Hebrew. During the Shoah, however, he made a clear choice: he wrote his last song-tombstone in the language of Eastern European Jews, in the language of the nation he identified with and with which he died.

Wolf Biermann was born in 1936 in Hamburg. His father was a German communist of Jewish origin who was first imprisoned by the Nazis as a communist and subsequently murdered in Auschwitz as a Jew. In 1953 Biermann decided to leave his native Hamburg and moved to East Germany. He was deeply convinced that he thus followed in the footsteps of his father and helped his hopes come true.⁸

Among the literary texts by Biermann we want to mention first the song *Ermutigung* (Encouragement) which perhaps expresses best what has always been characteristic of Biermann’s work: he tried to awaken hope in the readers and listeners of his songs, hope for a better world, for a better future. It is worth noting particularly the end of the song: “Das Grün bricht aus den Zweigen / Wir wolln das allen zeigen / Dann wissen sie Bescheid” (The green breaks from the branches / We want to show them all / Then they would know).⁹ This song has a clear reference to the GDR reality, but can also be understood as a kind of message to the Jewish people, especially as the image of the germinating green is also present

⁶ See J. Ficowski, op. cit., p. 9.

⁷ Y. Katzenelson, *Vittel Diary*, transl. from the Hebrew M. Cohen, Tel-Aviv’ 1964, p. 53.

⁸ See M. Dubrowska, *Auseinandersetzung mit der jüdischen Identität in Werken ausgewählter Schriftsteller aus der DDR*, Lublin, 2002, p. 139.

⁹ W. Biermann, *Alle Lieder*, Köln, 1991, p. 178.

in other Jewish poems of the post-war period, such as those by Leyb Olitski¹⁰, for instance in his touching poem *Afn bergl fun a kind* (At the child's grave), where the poet standing at the grave of a murdered Jewish child finds hope in the nature awakening to the new life.¹¹

Biermann's German-Jewish identity is visible throughout his life but it becomes particularly evident in the 80s and 90s.¹² Earlier, in the cycle whose title refers directly to Heine's¹³ *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen* (Germany. A Winter's Tale), in the song *Gesang für meine Genossen* (Song for My Comrades, 1965) Biermann writes: "Jetzt singe ich für meine Genossen alle / Das Lied von der veratenen Revolution / [...] Ich singe für meinen Genossen Dagobert Biermann / der ein Rauch ward aus den Schornsteinen / der von Auschwitz stinkend auferstand" (Now I sing for my comrades all / The song of the betrayed revolution / [...] I sing for my comrade Dagobert Biermann / who became the smoke from the chimneys / who stinking rose again from Auschwitz).¹⁴ Here we see the disappointment with the life in the GDR as well as the accusation that those who had died for the better world were betrayed: we also hear the call to commemorate forever the victims, including his own father.

In one of his other poems, *Schlaflied für Tanepen* (Lullaby for Tanepen¹⁵, 1980) Biermann expresses his criticism of the hypocrisy of German society which tries to convey the impression that there are only the 'good Germans' left: "Die Toten können nicht schlafen / Tief unter der Erd ein Geschrei / Das kommt, weil die Mörder hier oben / So lustig leben und frei" (The dead cannot sleep / deep under the earth a cry / That's because the killers / Live so merry and free up here).¹⁶

Finally, we want to focus on the controversial translation of the famous *Dos lid funem oysgehargetn yidishn folk* by Yitskhok Katsenelson. The translation was published in 1994 by Kiepenheuer & Witsch, with the German text on the right and the transcription from the Yiddish with handwritten comments by Biermann on the left. The song is preceded by a long introduction, while at the end there is a short acknowledgements section. In these texts one encounters some very personal statements of Biermann, presenting his beliefs. Such fragments include the following:

Gott im Himmel, könnte ich an Ihn glauben, würde ich zu Ihm in die Welten hoch schreien: Herr! Adonai! O, Herr, warum hast Du in den Zeiten der Nazi-Tyrannie geduldet, daß mein Vater, der sogar ein Kämpfer war, abgeschlachtet wurde, wie ein Kalb? Und warum duldest Du nun in der Demokratie auch noch diese Geschichtslüge, alle Juden hätten sich abschlachten lassen wie die Kälber (God in heaven, if I could believe in Him, I would cry

¹⁰ Leyb Olitsky (1894–1975), Polish and Israeli poet and novelist writing in Yiddish, translator from Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian.

¹¹ See M. Sitarz, *The Image of Postwar Poland in the Works of Leyb Olitski* [in:] *Under the Red Banner. Yiddish Culture in the Communist Countries in the Postwar Era*, eds. E. Grözinger, M. Ruta, Magdalena, Wiesbaden 2008, p. 185–202, here p. 191.

¹² See M. Dubrowska, op. cit., p. 138.

¹³ Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), Jewish-German poet of the Romantic era.

¹⁴ W. Biermann, *Alle Lieder*, op. cit., p. 77–78.

¹⁵ 'Tanepen' is a Gypsy term for 'child'.

¹⁶ W. Biermann, *Alle Lieder*, op. cit., p. 328.

high to Him in all the worlds, Lord! Adonai! O Lord, why did you tolerate in the times of the Nazi tyranny that my father, who was also a fighter, was slaughtered like a calf? And now why do you tolerate in a democracy this historical lie that all Jews let themselves be slaughtered like calves).¹⁷

Here we see Biermann’s deep personal commitment, which is also confirmed by the fact that he undertook the task of translation without actually knowing Yiddish: he used the transcription and had to rely on a native speaker to explain many of the unknown words to him.

However, as a result, the reader gets not a translation but a ‘farbesert’ text. Although it brings a new power to the original, it loses at the same time its many subtleties and the deeply shocking simplicity. What primarily appeals to the reader in Katsenelson’s text is the personal struggle of a broken man who must mobilise all remaining energy to offer a fitting farewell to his murdered nation. In Biermann’s translation the song mutates into a loud and powerful accusation. We notice this already at the beginning, where we listen to Katsenelson’s inner dialogue, who is trying to find the strength to express his sorrow:

1.
zing, nem dayn harf in hant, hoyl, oysgehoylt un gring,
af zayne strunes din, varf dayne finger shver,
vi hertser vi tsevetikte, dos lid dos letste zing,
zing fun di letste yidn af Oyropes erd.
2.
vi ken ikh zingen? vi ken ikh efenen mayn moyl
az ikh bin geblibn eyner nor aleyn –
mayn vayb un mayne oyfelekh di tsvey – a groyl!
mikh groylt a groyl ... me veynt! ikh her vayt a geveyn –
3.
zing, zing! heyb uf tsevetokt un gebrokh’n hoykh dayn shtim
zukh! zukh em uf dort oybn, oyb er iz nokh do -
un zing em ... zing dos letste lid fun letstn yidn em,
gelebt, geshtorbn, nisht bagrobn un nishto...¹⁸

Katsenelson mobilises himself against his own prostration (what one can recognise, among others, by the desperate: “how shall I sing?”), he searches for the necessary strength to sing the last song. Eventually, he can achieve this thanks to the power that he finds when giving the voice to the dead. We see here a man who, despite everything, resolves to sing about his murdered family and his murdered beloved people. His harp is small and hollow, it has thin strings, the fingers of the poet are as heavy as the suffering heart, but he wants to sing in spite of everything. He wants to sing the song about the last Jews of Europe, although he can barely open his mouth out of sheer grief. His dearest are dead, someone is crying, the poet hears a distant weeping. In the third stanza, the poet tries to raise the sad and broken voice in order to ask whether God still exists – it is a question that often

¹⁷ W. Biermann, *Jizchak Katzenelson, ein Jude...*, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁸ Y. Katsenelson, *Dos lid funem oysgehargetn yidishn folk*, Nyu-York 1963, p. 19.

comes up in the Yiddish literature connected with the Shoah: is God still there? How could He allow all this? The question is however not answered directly, for the poet wants to sing his song to God, the last song of the last Jew who ‘lived, was not buried and is gone’. All this is expressed in simple words, the language seems subdued and quiet.

And now the translation of Biermann:

1.

Du, sing! Greif die zerhackte, deine nackte Harfe, singe doch
Schmeiß ins Gewirr der Saiten deine Finger für ein Lied
Sing schmerzgebrochne Herzen. Sing diesem Europa noch
Den großen Abgesang von seinem allerletzten Jid

2.

Wie kann ich singen, aus zertretner Kehle kommt kein Laut
Greul über Greul: nur ich blieb übrig, ich allein
Wo blieb mein Weib, wo unsre beiden Vögelchen, mir graut
Ich hör ein Weinen – meine ganze Welt ist voll Gewein

3.

Sing! und erhebe die Stimme, sing mit Schmerz und Wut
Such! such, da oben, ob es IHN noch gibt und seine Welt sich dreht
Sing IHM hoch oben seines letzten Jidden Lied: Der Jud
Gelebt, kriecht und ohne Grab vom Wind verweht¹⁹

Biermann creates a monumental text, but one which overshadows the original monument. The poet is encouraged by an outside pressing voice to testify, his harp is destroyed and described as naked, as one to be forced to play. He is to sing the great song at full strength, his fingers are no longer tired and heavy. In Biermann’s text the throat of the poet is trampled and therefore no sound comes out of it; in Katsenelson’s song the speaker is dumb after being confronted with all the horrors of the world. And further on, in Biermann’s translation the whole world of the poet is full of crying, whereas Katsenelson in his song hears only a far away weeping: most likely it is something very quiet and personal, perhaps the crying of his murdered children. While Katsenelson wants to sing of the last Jews, Biermann speaks of the last Jew, which makes the whole text a swan song of Katsenelson himself. Also the third stanza is significantly changed in the translation. In Biermann’s text the poet should sing with rage, which is absent in Katsenelson’s song at this stage. The accusation of God is present, but in totally different words. Biermann expresses himself with bitter irony: “whether HE is still there and HIS world revolves”. The sarcasm is additionally strengthened by the possessive pronoun “his” in the phrase: “his last Jew’s song” and the changes in the last line of the third stanza: in Yiddish we have the neutral word “died”, in German the negatively imbued “croaked”, in Yiddish there is the simple “isn’t there”, in German the pompous “gone with the wind”.

¹⁹ J. Katzenelson, *Dos lied vunem ojsgehargetn jidischn volk. Großer Gesang vom ausgerotteten jüdischen Volk [aus dem Jiddischen übersetzt von Wolf Biermann]*, Köln 1994, p. 49.

There are many more such examples. One can of course criticise Biermann *ad infinitum*, but one should also try to understand him. Fifty years after the war, he translates Katsenelson’s elegy as a bard who wants to wake up his complacent audience. As pointed out by Davies in his careful evaluation of the moral stances adopted in the two German translations spanning almost half a century (Adler’s and Biermann’s), rage – so much in evidence in Biermann’s text – was “excluded from the patterns of polite public memory work”.²⁰ This fact is of vital importance for a thorough assessment of Biermann’s translation – a task which we are planning to undertake in future work.

To end on a different note, among the non-literary works of Biermann we would like to mention his essay, the epilogue to Władysław Szpilman’s book *Das wunderbare Überleben. Warschauer Erinnerungen 1939–1945* (The wonderful survival. Warsaw Memories 1939–1945). In this text, which he wrote at the request of the author himself, Biermann emphasizes, among other things: “Und was war das stärkste Lebenselixier in diesem großen Sterben? – Der Hoffnungslosen Hoffen, also die Hoffnung, von der behauptet wird, sie sei es, die immer erst zualerletzt stirbt” (And what was the most powerful elixir of life in this great dying? – The hopeless hope, that is the hope which is claimed to be the one which always dies the last).²¹ Here we see again that the poet is looking for hope everywhere, even in the tragic past.

In 2007 Biermann was asked to give a eulogy at the ceremony of the Leo Baeck Award, the highest award of the Central Council of Jews in Germany which was granted to Angela Merkel. In his speech, he recalls among other things the previous words of the Chancellor: “Wir haben erst spät gelernt – und ich sage das für mich auch persönlich – wie unermesslich viel Deutschland durch die Shoa verloren hat und wie viel Liebe deutscher Juden zu diesem Land unerwidert geblieben ist” (We have learned very late – and I say that also for myself – how immeasurably much Germany lost in the Shoah and how much love of the German Jews to this land has remained unrequited).²² Biermann refers with these words to Rabbi Leo Baeck, but they are also valid for his own family history.

In Biermann’s literary and non-literary works the combination of sometimes very personal confessions with pronounced political statements is typical. One sees that his work was influenced both by private experiences as well as the communist family tradition. It seems however that this poet contesting the GDR reality remained an emigrant in his own home, in which he shared the sad fate of many other Jews of the Diaspora. Probably this fact could also provide an explanation why he chose to translate Katsenelson’s song in the first place as well as which strategic decisions he made about the final shape of the German version.

²⁰ P. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 708.

²¹ W. Biermann, *Brücke zwischen Wladyslaw Szpilman und Wilm Hosenfeld, gebaut aus 49 Anmerkungen. Essay* [in:] W. Szpilman, *Das wunderbare Überleben. Warschauer Erinnerungen 1939–1945*, Düsseldorf–München 1998, p. 205–231, here p. 210.

²² W. Biermann, Wolf, W. *Biermann lobt die “promovierte FDJlerin”*, <http://www.welt.de/politik/article1337090/Wolf-Biermann-lobt-die-promovierte-FDJlerin.html> (06.01.2007, access: 03.06.2015).

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