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"RESTE EN ÉCHO LA VOIX" – ITZHAK KATZENELSON'S *DOS LID FUN OYSGEHARGETN YIDISHN FOLK* IN BATIA BAUM'S FRENCH TRANSLATION

ABSTRACT

This essay offers a discussion of Batia Baum's translation of Katzenelson's elegy into French. Opening with a presentation of the *Maison de la culture yiddish – Bibliothèque Medem* and Baum's achievements as a translator from Yiddish, the article highlights the significance of the poem written in France during the German occupation and published in Paris shortly after WW2. In an illustrative analysis, challenges of the text are addressed and Baum's choices are presented.

KEYWORDS: Itzhak Katzenelson, *Dos lid fun oysgehargetn yidishn folk*, Yiddish poetry, translation, Batia Baum

"Reste en écho la voix", the (original) voice is preserved in its reverberations… This evocative turn of phrase serves as the title of Rachel Ertel's postface (Ertel 2007) to the first complete translation of Katzenelson's[1] lament on the murdered Jewish people into French. The phrase is suggestive on several levels. In the meaning intended by Ertel, it refers to the annihilation of the Yiddishland in the Shoah: nothing is left except for the voices of the murdered Jews. In the context of Batia Baum's translation, *Le chant du peuple juif assassiné* (Katzenelson 2005), it expresses the fact that Yiddish voices cannot speak to us directly, that they can reach us only when echoed in another language. And finally, since an echo reverberates in an empty space, it cannot become meaningful unless the listeners can relate to it and make some sense of the original cry. The gap in understanding between the intended audience, addressed by the author, and the actual one, addressed in translation, must be somehow bridged.

First, a few words about the current publication and its author. Batia Baum was born in 1941. She studied in Oxford and Jerusalem and participated in the Yiddish seminars of the well-known Yiddish teachers: Rachel Ertel and Itzkhok Niborski. She is active

[1] I use the YIVO transcription of Yiddish but since Katzenelson's name is transcribed from the Hebrew script differently in various languages, the spelling in my sources is not always the same.

as a teacher of Yiddish and a translator from Yiddish. She has translated works of such prominent Yiddish writers as Yitskhok Leybush Peretz, Alter Kacyzne, Miriam Ulinover, Avrom Sutzkever, S. Anski, Oyzer Varshavski and Peretz Markish. She participates in bilingual readings of Yiddish plays and poems organized by the Medem Library (cf. Gepner 2012)[2].

Based in Paris, the *Maison de la culture yiddish – Bibliothèque Medem* houses the largest media library dedicated to the Yiddish culture in Europe. The beginnings of this unique institution reach back to 1929 when socialists from the Bund founded the *Arbeter-klub afn nomen Vladimir Medem*, Workers' Club named after the Bund ideologist Vladimir Medem (1879–1923). Alongside, they established the *Nomberg-bibliotek bam Medem-farband* (Nomberg library within the Medem Union), named after the Yiddish writer Hersh-Dovid Nomberg (1876–1927). It was first installed at 50, rue des Francs-Bourgeois, in the 3rd arrondissement of Paris. After liberation, the Library reopened in October 1944 and took the name of *Medem-bibliotek bam Arbeter-ring* (Medem Library at the Workers' Circle). Since the late 1970s, responding to a resurgence of interest in the Yiddish civilization, the Library started to offer courses of the Yiddish language and culture. In 2002, the Medem Library and the Association for the Study and Dissemination of Yiddish Culture (AEDCY) joined forces to create the *Maison de la culture yiddish – Bibliothèque Medem*, the main centre for the conservation and dissemination of Yiddish culture in Europe. Its mission comprises preservation of the Yiddish heritage, teaching of Yiddish through courses and cultural practice workshops, dissemination of knowledge through the publication of didactic manuals and collections of texts in Yiddish as well as promotion of a living culture, through recitals by Yiddish singers, screenings of movies and performances of plays in Yiddish, readings of texts and conferences (cf. Olejnik 2013)[3].

In 1997, the publishing house *Éditions Bibliothèque Medem* was founded to promote the Yiddish language and literature. In 2005, it printed Baum's translation of Katzenelson's lament in a bilingual edition[4], along with the original Yiddish text, clearly intended also for pedagogical purposes as she runs a translation workshop in the Medem library. At the same time, Baum collaborated with Koulizh Kedez (pen-name of Yann-Yeun Kefeleg / Jean-Yves Queffellec) on his own translation of Katzenelson's elegy into the Breton language: *Kan war wallazhadeg ar bobl yuzev* (Katsenelson 2005)[5]. For her life's work as a translator, Baum was awarded in due time *Le Grand Prix de la traduction de la Société des gens de lettres* (2017)[6]. Baum's French translation of the poem contributes to the preservation of the memory of the Shoah in France. The text

[2] See also https://www.yiddishweb.com/animateurs/batia-baum/, https://akadem.org/fiche_conferencier.php?id=148, https://catalogue.bnf.fr/rechercher.do?motRecherche=Batia+Baum&critereRecherche=0&depart=0&facetteModifiee=ok, https://cours.yiddish.paris/batia-baum/ (accessed on 30.07.2023).

[3] See also https://yiddish.paris/bibliotheque-medem/, accessed on 30.07.2023.

[4] I had access only to a later monolingual edition published as a 'pocket book' by Zulma (Katzenelson 2007).

[5] This is one of several translations, like the translation into Ladino by Arnau Pons (Katsenelson 2006 / Katzenelson 2006) or into Esperanto by Mikaelo Bronštejn (Kacenelson 2021), which are largely of antiquarian interest. Not to question their literary value or cultural significance, such translations primarily testify to the monumental status of Katzenelson's lament which calls for its inclusion into the canon of endangered or niche languages.

[6] Cf. https://www.yiddishweb.com/batia-baum-grand-prix-sgdl-de-traduction-2017/ (accessed on 30.07.2023).

has received many positive reviews and since its publication has reverberated in the French cultural life[7].

Katzenelson wrote his lament in the Vittel internment camp for foreign nationals between October 3rd, 1943 and January 17th, 1944. Three months later he was sent to Drancy transit camp and therefrom to Auschwitz, where he perished with his eldest son in a gas chamber on arrival. The manuscript was prepared for publication after the liberation of the camp (September 1944) and appeared in Paris shortly after the war ended (Katsenelson 1945)[8]. One may wonder why the poetic tombstone for European Jewry written and published on the French soil was translated into French only sixty years later[9], long after Hebrew (Katzenelson 1948), German (Katzenelson 1951), English (Katzenelson 1980) and Polish (Kacenelson 1982) renderings, as part of a big wave of translations starting in the 1990s, which so far includes two German (Katzenelson 1994 and 1996), two Russian (Katsienielson 1992 and 2000) and two Italian versions (Katzenelson 1995 and 2009) as well as a Spanish (Katzenelson 1993), Swedish (Katzenelson 1998), Dutch (Katnelson 1996), Japanese (Katseneruson 1999), Breton (Katsenelson 2005), Ladino (Katsenelson 2006), Hungarian (Katzenelson 2014) and Esperanto (Kacenelson 2021), and another English (Katzenelson 2021) translation. An attempt to explain this *prima facie* puzzling fact in the context of the history of Jews in France, especially Vichy France, merits a separate discussion.

In many ways, writing the lament was an almost unthinkable task. As Katzenelson pointed out himself: “It is impossible to describe these horrors that exceed anything in the history of mankind. There do not exist the words to describe them; they have not yet been created” (Katzenelson 1964: 35)[10]. No less challenging was his personal trauma – apart from his beloved wife and two younger sons he had lost in Poland everything he held dear. Last but not least, he felt compelled, against himself, to reject the Jewish covenant with God who had failed his ‘chosen people’.

Translating such a text – created against all odds – borders on the unfeasible. The difficulties begin with the title itself: דאָס ליד פֿון אויסגעהרגעטן יידישן פֿאָלק (*Dos lid fun oysgehargetn yidishn folk*). First, the preposition ‘*fun*/of’ expresses a relation between two referents (‘song’ of ‘people’) which does not specify whether the latter is the object of the

[7] Selected reviews, discussions and presentations of Baum’s translation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1do5-6w6yU, https://troyes-champagne-mediatheque.fr/conference-le-chant-du-peuple-juif-assassine-de-itzhak-katzenelson/, https://akadem.org/scopefiche.php?ID=139726&wk=4&year=2023, https://actualitte.com/livres/1553278/le-chant-du-peuple-juif-assassine-yitskhok-katzenelson-9782843044083, https://www.fondationshoah.org/memoire/le-chant-du-peuple-juif-assassine-un-concert-lecture-de-rafael-goldwasser, https://tube.ac-lyon.fr/w/1WJTz7LggaHemkZS9JN5Jd, https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2007/05/31/le-chant-du-peuple-juif-assassine-de-yitskhok-katzenelson_917123_3260.html, https://composer.aberdam.com/index.php?composer=6&aberdam=1, https://www.levenaiu.org/lecture-du-chant-du-peuple-juif-assassine-dyitskhok-katzenelson/, https://diacritik.com/2021/01/26/peut-on-dresser-un-bilan-metaphysique-apres-auschwitz/#more-63202, https://www.printempsdespoetes.com/Le-Chant-du-peuple-juif-assassine-d-Yitskhok-Katzenelson, https://pierresel.typepad.fr/la-pierre-et-le-sel/2014/09/yitskhok-katzenelson-le-chant-du-peuple-juif-assassin%C3%A9.html (accessed on 30.07.2023).

[8] For a full account see Pawelec 2023.

[9] In 1970, an abridged French translation, apparently based on an Italian one (Katzenelson 1963), was published by ‘L’Association des Originaires de Lodz’. It was a niche publication with little impact.

[10] The original manuscript is preserved in the archives of the Ghetto Fighters’ House in Israel (Katzenelson 1943), for the French translation see Katzenelson 2016: 49.

song or its author. Fortunately, this significant ambiguity can be preserved in French (*du peuple*), while in many languages, like Polish, it gives way to a single, conventional reading '*pieśń o*/song about'. The alternative reading is important since the narrator counts himself among the dead – his voice is theirs, he acts as their medium. Second, the adjective '*yidish*' is also ambiguous: apart from 'Jewish' it can mean, specifically, 'Yiddish'. Since Katzenelson writes about the annihilation of the Yiddishland, the latter reading seems no less plausible but Baum has chosen otherwise. The participle '*oysgehargetn*' and the noun '*folk*' pose yet other problems but those already mentioned should be enough to indicate the nature of the challenge. I will now move on to more general issues.

Since Katzenelson's poem is also a testimony, the geographical and cultural space of the narrative as well as the identity of its protagonists have great significance, not just for the poet. One may assume that the task of the translator consists in recreating the vanished world for the reader. This is a great challenge as the Yiddishland was a multilingual, culturally-complex reality. Hence, most toponyms occur either in Yiddish or Polish forms, while the latter are deprived of diacritics, spelled according to the Jewish pronunciation and sometimes shortened. For instance, 'Będzin' appears in the original text as '*Bendin*' (VII.14.1)[11], while 'Leszno' Street as '*Lesh*' (XIII.3.1). Leaving such names unchanged in translation, and with no annotations as Baum chose to do, transforms the historical reality into a far-away, almost fictional location (sadly, one is reminded of Jarry's "set in Poland, that is to say Nowhere").

When Katzenelson mourns his murdered family and his whole people, he mentions various names[12]:

> J'avais ici des amis chers, écrivains yiddish, musiciens, peintres... il n'y a plus personne!
> On les a tous assassinés, Hillel Zeitlin, traîné à l'*Umschlag* dans son châle de prière
> Et abattu sur place d'une balle, Yisroel Shtern, Guilbert, diamants de notre couronne,
> Et les Warszawski, Davidovitch, Jacques Lévy, Ostrzega, couronnes sur nos têtes fières! (XIII.6.1–4)

Apart from misprints, especially of the names '*Gilbert*' and '*Levi*' (original spelling), what one finds striking here is lack of notes which would help the reader to place those names in the historical context.

In the quoted quatrain there is, however, a commendable choice of the translator: a borrowing from German is italicised (*Umschlag*) and explained in the glossary. Still, in more complex cases Baum does not offer sorely needed help. For instance, when the narrator addresses Adam Czerniaków, Head of the Jewish Council in the Warsaw Ghetto, as '*Adamie*' (V.8.1, 2, 4; V.10.1, 3) and '*Prezesie'* (V.13.3), these Polish vocative forms

[11] In my essay I'm referring to Katzenelson's poem using the number of the canto, the stanza(s) and the verse(s).

[12] Hilel Cajtlin / Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942) was a Hebrew and Yiddish writer scholar and thinker, Izrael Sztern / Yisroel Shtern (1894–1942) was a Yiddish writer, Szlomo Gilbert / Shloyme Gilbert (1885–1942) was a Jewish writer, Abraham Cwi Dawidowicz / Avrom Hersh Davidovitsh (1887–1942) was an educator, composer and conductor, Jakir Warszawski / Yaker Varshavski (1885–1942) was a Hebrew writer and journalist, Żak Lewi / Jacques Levi / Isaac Löwy was an actor and writer, Abraham Ostrzega (1899–1942) was a sculptor and painter (cf. Kacenelson 1982: 101).

signal defamiliarization – Katzenelson is highly critical of Czerniaków’s Polonization which he equates with betrayal. In the French translation we have just ‘*Adam*’ and ‘*Président*’, with no indication of Katzenelson’s attitude nor even a hint offoreignization.

Baum offered some help with Yiddish cultural and political terms. On eight occasions they were preserved in transliteration and explained in the glossary: ‘*gaonim*’, ‘*goyim*’, ‘*khalutzim*’, ‘*rabbi*’, ‘*reb*’, ‘*shames*’, ‘*shul*’ and ‘*shomrim*’ (Katzenelson 2007: 155). In general, however, Baum used French equivalents rather than borrowings. This tendency may be illustrated with a verse from canto VIII, where the destruction of a synagogue and the rabbi’s humiliation is described:

> Les *shul* sont incendiées, les rouleaux de Torah brûlés, les rabbins torturés...
> Tu es déjà entré dans une synagogue ? L’arche sainte est contre le mur de l’Est, tu sais !
> Et la tribune au beau milieu. Et le rabbin, *reb* Yossele... tu sais où il est ?
> Il court tout autour... Un Allemand parmi des Allemands, cravache à la main, l’a ordonné...
> (VIII.6.1–4)

Apart from the italicized Yiddish words, explained in the glossary, we find here two French equivalents: ‘rouleaux de Torah’ (*sifre-toyres)* and ‘l’arche sainte’ (*orn-koydesh*). The term ‘*bime*’ – bimah, an elevated platform in the synagogue used for Torah reading – is translated as ‘*la tribune*’ even though in French there exists the word ‘la bimah’. In his analysis of such lexical items, Majtczak shows that in Ficowski’s Polish translation (Kacenelson 1982) there are almost twice as many borrowings as in the French one; surprisingly, perhaps, in this respect Baum’s rendering is closest to the Japanese translation (cf. 2019 : 304). Indeed, it may seem *prima facie* unusual that in the country with the third largest Jewish population in the world (around half a million) Yiddish and Hebrew derived vocabulary is used in a present-day translation with a similarly low frequency as in its counterpart published in Japan, where the Jewish presence has been minimal. This may be easily explained, however, as a result of widespread assimilation (Yiddish, if spoken at all, was after the war used primarily by immigrants from Eastern Europe[13]) and by the pressure to use French terms in the public discourse. Polish culture, on both counts, used to be different: in the interwar period, the Jewish masses (around 10 per cent of the whole population) remained largely unassimilated, while their Yiddish vocabulary was in general circulation.

References to the Hebrew Bible appear in the poem in crucial places as part of Katzenelson’s bitter dialogue with the Jewish tradition. Even though Christians share in this religious heritage, Baum wisely decided that one could not expect an intimate knowledge of the Old Testament in a secular society and she provided ‘chapter and verse’ of the most obvious quotations (p. 153). Still, there is no consistency in her translation of those quotes. She generally preserves biblical phrases in Roman transliteration but sometimes the original Hebrew is skipped. For instance, in canto II the narrator evokes Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of Dry Bones (Ez. 37:1–14), echoing (in Hebrew) God’s original question addressed to Ezekiel and sarcastically addressing it (in Yiddish) to the prophet: “hatikhyeno? zog, tsi veln nokh / uflebn di beyner, o?” (II.5.1–1). In French there

[13] For more information on Yiddish culture in France see Niborski 2009.

is only: "« Peuvent-ils revivre ? » Dis, peut on / Redonner vie à ces ossements ?". The loss of the original Hebrew is far from trivial since Katzenelson's quarrel with the Bible and its final rejection as a '*maysele aza*/just so story' (XV.15.2) should be signalled to the reader with all available means. When in canto III Katzenelson quotes the Book of Lamentations 3:1, again translating the Hebrew phrase into Yiddish "Ani hagever – ikh bin der man" (III.4.1), Baum does keep the Hebrew expression: "*Ani hagever* – je suis l'homme", and she also helpfully provides the rest of the biblical verse in the notes: "qui a vu la misère sous la verge de Son courroux" (Katzenelson 2007: 153). This could be enough for inquisitive readers who will consult chapter 3 of this biblical book, but it doesn't seem sufficient for the others, since the larger context is needed to appreciate the point of the quote, namely Katzenelson's rejection of biblical hope in God's ultimate assistance.

In his lament, Katzenelson speaks in the name of his beloved, murdered people (*mayne yidn* / my Jews). His love and tenderness is visible in the whole text, especially in the passages about the children:

> J'ai contemplé cette petite de deux ans, cette petite vieille, cette grand-mère...
> Cent ans d'âge porte cette fillette juive, avec sa gravité et sa lourde peine.
> Ce que sa grand-mère n'a pas vu même en rêve, cette fillette l'a vu, et en réalité.
> J'ai pleuré, et me suis dit: ne pleure pas, la peine s'efface, reste la gravité !
>
> La gravité demeure, se déverse dans le monde, dans la vie, lui donne profondeur,
> La gravité juive, elle dégrise, éveille, ouvre grand les yeux aveugles, les avive...
> C'est comme une Torah pour le monde, comme une prophétie, une sainte écriture...
> (VI.6.1–4, VI.7.1–3)

It is in this context that Katzenelson articulates the crucial phrase '*yidishe ernst*' – his equivalent of Holy Scripture 'for the world' – which he takes to be necessary for 'the work of salvation' of the human race. Yiddish '*ernst*', originating from German 'Ernst', is usually translated as 'seriousness', like in Rosenbloom's rendering (Katzenelson 1980: 38) and Baum follows suit. Still, what Katzenelson means is not '*gravité*', a 'serious demeanour' or 'powaga' in Polish (Ficowski in Kacenelson 1982: 38–39), but 'commitment', 'dedication' or even 'self-sacrifice'. This is the ultimate message of Katzenelson's lament 'to the world': those of you, who participated in the annihilation of the Yiddishland or did nothing to prevent it, criminally or just foolishly deprived yourselves of Jewish dedication.

One could argue that the 'sanctification' of the murdered Jewish people is also inscribed in the form of the poem. Katzenelson's lament consists of fifteen cantos, each of which is made of fifteen stanzas with four iambic verses ending in cross rhymes 'abab'. Why did Katzenelson display the number 15 so conspicuously? Various suggestions might be offered. For instance, according to the Old Testament, there were fifteen generations from Abraham to Solomon – during whose reign the Kingdom of Judah was at its peak – and another fifteen generations from Solomon to Zedekiah, the last ruler of the Jewish state before the Babylonian captivity. Hence, number 15 seems suitable to sum up Jewish history. The most widespread explanation, however, is linked to Gematria, i.e. the Jewish practice to assign numerical values to the letters of the alphabet. In this system, '15' represents

the name of God. But since there is no God – heavens are empty (canto IX) – the sacred name may refer only to the murdered Jewish people.

In conclusion, let me return to the aural metaphor invoked by Ertel. What is the timbre of the ‘voice’ echoed in Baum’s translation? In some ways – pointed out above – it is less Yiddish than it could be (and is in other vernaculars). Still, Baum’s version is perhaps unique in recreating the legato, wailing quality of Katzenelson’s phrasing[14] – a lament over final devastation: “Il était un peuple, il était, il / n’est plus… Il était un peuple, il était, il a disparu !” (XV.15.1).

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[14] Cf. a remark of Katzenelson’s first translator into German: „In grosser Erregung gesprochen (...) die yiddishe (...) steigert sich zu einem atemlosen legato” (‘Spoken in great agitation, the yiddish [original] rises to a breathless legato’), Adler 1951: 7.

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