

## YIDDISH LITERATURE BEYOND THE GERMAN-SPEAKING AREA

Chone Shmeruk

The presence of the Yiddish language in Northern Italy represents a relatively brief chapter in the articulated and multi-territorial history of this language and its literature. We are talking about a period ranging from the end of the 15th to the beginning of the 17th century. We are in other words referring to the 16th century only. Nevertheless, anyone taking an interest in Yiddish literature as a whole cannot fail to recognize the great importance of this albeit brief chapter in Yiddish history; of a phenomenon, that is, which has reached such a high level of perfection and has left behind tangible traces even beyond Italian boundaries for a long time. Today it is still possible to benefit from such particular artistic results.

Moreover, if numbers are taken into account, the quantity of Yiddish books published in Italy is certainly not significant. When in 1982 I published my bibliographical article 'Yiddish Printing in Italy'<sup>1</sup>, I counted only 35 among the books and pamphlets printed in Venice, Cremona, Mantua, Sabbioneta and Verona between 1545 and 1609. The list also includes a few reprints. Unfortunately 13 of these titles (almost a third) have not come down to us. We have lost track of them, but we know of their existence from indirect sources. However, even in those few books that have come down to us there are elements which still strike and move us today. Some of them became pillars of Yiddish literature for many generations, and some of the literary innovations, which originated in Italy in the 16th century, had in the coming centuries an influence on other countries as well.

Before proceeding to the main point, I would like to make a few observations on the nature of these innovations. Yiddish prose began with the books published in Italy. We can already find it in all its richness in the 16th century in the editorial project of Israel Cornelio Adelkind and his son Daniel. Inspired by Italian models, they published stories in the form of chapbooks, which provided the basis for the *Mayse-bikhl*, that dominated Yiddish prose for centuries. This literary model, of which the first examples are represented by the Venice editions of 1552 (see Nos. \*63, \*84, \*86-\*88), is still present in twentieth century Yiddish prose.

Apart from only one exception, the tradition to provide Yiddish books, mainly for young people, with illustrations also began in Venice. The numerous and beautiful illustrations of the *Minhagim* printed in Venice in 1593 (see No. \*41) were not only used for the tens of editions of the book that appeared in the following centuries in various areas of the diaspora, but also

inspired the illustrations of many other books, not only in Yiddish, which drew from the innovations of the Venetian edition. It is a pity that other illustrations of Yiddish books of the Italian area have not been the subject of a similarly constant attention. We can see in those Italian illustrations the beginning of the aesthetic education of Jewish children who would otherwise have missed, for a long time still, illustrated books intended directly for them.

However, aside from these innovations and other feats achieved in Italy in the period in question, the greatest glory of Ashkenazi Jewry concerning Yiddish literature is undoubtedly the creation of the school of the extensive romance in *otava rima* stanzas by Elye Bokher (1468-1549). Apparently we seem to be dealing only with borrowings from 'outside', from the surrounding culture. In fact we are looking at original and entertaining literary works which have enriched Yiddish literature to this very day. I will try, albeit briefly, to explain the essence of this school.

As it is well known, the birth of the Yiddish language and its literature occurred, during the Middle Ages in the German-speaking countries. The language developed on the basis of Middle High German and its dialects; the literature reached its first peak with the large-scale biblical epic which began to flourish in the second half of the 14th century, coming to its fullest expression in the famous *Shmuel-bukh* and *Melokhim-bukh* and other similar works based on the Hebrew Bible. In this type of epic the author's dependence on German forms and contents is perfectly evident. Without going into further details, we may affirm that the presence and influence of German literary patterns is easily detectable in one way or another within the Yiddish literature of the time.

On the margins of the original literature in Yiddish, the relation to German literature materialized in a most direct and distinct fashion by way of transliterations of German books, generally of popular circulation and secular character. The Jews in the German-speaking countries complemented their traditional Jewish literature with the entertaining literary genres which were missing from the bilingual, Hebrew-Yiddish, cultural system. These genres were appropriated from the narrative literature of the surrounding culture.

In German-speaking countries it was sufficient to transliterate German works, turning the Latin characters into Hebrew ones, in order to make them accessible to the Yiddish speakers, who did not read Latin characters and identified them with the Christian religion, as the definition of the Latin script as *galkhes* (meaning 'priests' script') bears witness to. Besides the direct

<sup>1</sup> See translations of this essay in English and Italian above, pp. 171-190.

transliteration of the German source, it was common practice to change or remove whatever made clear reference, in the German text, to the Christian faith. In this way every text became 'kosher'. In some cases, even without such an effort the German text was transliterated into Hebrew characters. Thus, for example, in the first German work of this kind that has come down to us, dating back to the 14th century, the word *Kirche* (church) was substituted by *tifle* (a pejorative epithet) only once and not throughout the text.

There is no doubt that Yiddish speakers were able to enjoy these texts since they did not have any difficulty in understanding them. What we now define as 'transliteration', and a bit of censorship as well, was enough to render unnecessary any effort to translate from one language into the other. This phenomenon of supplying the lack in the Jewish cultural polysystem with works from German literature is known at least since the 14th century. Its beginnings appear in the transliteration into Hebrew characters of a German epic entitled *Dukus Horant*, in a manuscript dated 1382, which was found in the Cairo *Genizah* and is now known as 'the Cambridge manuscript'. Moreover, even as late as the 19th century German *Maskilim* still made use of Hebrew characters in order to familiarize the Yiddish speakers with Standard German.

At least since the 14th century the Yiddish language and its literature spread as a result of the Jewish migration to Poland, Northern Italy and even the Near East. It is only natural, that this migration brought about a severance from the German-speaking environment, which had until then constituted the primary source on which Yiddish literature was drawing the genres it lacked.

Except for an isolated case in Poland, we do not know of any transliteration into Hebrew characters of any German literary text, neither among the manuscripts nor among the printed books, in the lands of immigration. The isolated case is that of a popular poem entitled *Her Ditrikh* (Theodor of Verona) which was printed in Cracow in 1597. The fact that the manuscript was brought to Poland from Hannover (Germany) represents the exception that confirms the rule of the severance of Polish Jews from the traditional sources of this literature.

Although the results of this severance from the German-speaking area are evident in many ways, the new linguistic environment did not bring the Jews that settled in Poland any closer to the Polish language nor to its literature. Apart from a few folkloristic elements, there is no evidence of any significant contact between Polish culture and literature and the Yiddish speakers who had previously maintained a quite close and active contact with German literature, at least with the folk literature. This state of things persisted in Poland until the

beginning of the 19th century. It was the direct expression of the growing isolation of Polish Jews within their own traditional culture, which originated certain specific achievements of Yiddish literature instead of looking for complementation in the non-Jewish environment. The best examples are the popular genres of ethical literature and of homiletic prose, such as the *Tse'na ure'na* (1622), the work that represents the apex achieved by Yiddish literature in Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The situation was utterly different in Italy during the Renaissance. Despite the fact that the word 'ghetto' – which is still used nowadays to indicate the voluntary or involuntary isolation of the Jews – originated in Venice, the Ashkenazim of Northern Italy maintained a lively contact not only with the language of the Italian environment, but with its literature as well. In the 16th century many of them understood Italian, and thus were at mid-century the natural addressees of a bilingual song in Yiddish and Italian (see No. 47, The Ages of Man). However, at the same time many others remained attached to Yiddish and to the literature written in the language they understood. It was amidst them and for their sake that the scholar and poet Elye Bokher, an outstanding figure of contemporary Italian Jewry, composed his Yiddish works since the beginning of the century.

Today, after the formerly missing introduction to *Paris un' Viena* has been found, we know more about Elye Bokher's Yiddish oeuvre and regret deeper the loss of his manifold Yiddish works. As early as 1507 this Jew of German origin had already created with his *Bovo d'Antona*, better known as *Bovo-bukh*, that school of romance in *ottava rima* stanzas we referred to earlier. We use the verb 'created' because despite its Italian source – which belongs to the same kind of works called in German *Volksbuch* that had served to supply the lacking genres in Yiddish literature – this work is not only no transliteration at all, but even the term 'translation' does not do it any justice: Elye Bokher has done much more than a mere translation, even if we disregard his brilliant adaptation of the Italian *ottava rima* to the Yiddish language: an adaptation rendered through an original innovation of the iambic meter.<sup>2</sup> What we have here is a poignant work, which only apparently conforms with the Italian original, but which in practice distances itself from it, not only through the 'judaization' of the characters and their behavior, but also through the creation of a consciously ironic distance from their nature. Instead of a transliteration from the German, the Yiddish reader was thus presented with a book that, although based on an original literary work from the new Italian environment, had its own independent and peculiar characteristics.

I can affirm without hesitation that Elye Bokher was – owing to

his creative and original ways of adapting literary works borrowed from 'outside' – the founder of a whole school. I have no doubt that only some of the texts of this school have come down to us. Besides the *Bovo-bukh* we possess evidence of two later developments of this school. On the one hand we have, at the climax of its perfection, the *Paris un' Viena* of the mid-16th century; and on the other – a version in *ottava rima* of *Kinig Artus Hof* (King Arthur's Court), which has come down to us in a later Prague edition from the second half of the 17th century (1652-1679), but which was certainly composed earlier (for a different earlier version see No. 68). We may thus assume that other books of this kind were written in Italy either by Elye Bokher or by his disciples, and have not survived.

Particular attention ought to be paid to *Paris un' Viena*, the most extraordinary work of Elye Bokher's school and the most important one among those that have come down to us from the 16th century, and not only from Italy. *Paris un' Viena* was already in 1928 considered one of the most important works of Yiddish literature till the Jewish Enlightenment period.<sup>3</sup> The validity of this evaluation, which was based on a single incomplete copy (the first 24 of the 72 pages were missing) of the Veronese edition of 1594 (see No. \*69) increased with the discovery in 1986 of a complete copy of the same edition, and turned indisputable: *Paris un' Viena* is indeed in many aspects the most important, most elaborate and most amusing poetic work of Yiddish literature from its beginnings to the 19th century.

*Paris un' Viena* is based on a very popular book that was widespread in 16th-century Italy. This work, which is full of entangled adventures, still bears traces of the medieval chivalric ethos as well as reminiscences of the Crusades and the meeting between Christian Europe and the Orient. On this backdrop an apparently impossible love affair evolves between Viena, the beautiful daughter of King Dolphin, and Paris, the prow knight, son of a lowly born vassal. The plot develops towards the successful consummation of their love.

In the Yiddish version the text has been substantially abridged by avoiding the copious repetitions of the Italian source and consciously removing the Christian features inherent in it. The author of *Paris un' Viena* did not hesitate in attributing to his characters Jewish manners of behavior and speech, without altering the chivalric elements. As in Elye Bokher's *Bovo-bukh*, this granted the Jewish reader a humorous sense of feigned closeness to the world of chivalry.

The Italian original is no elaborate text, nor is it endowed with exceptional literary qualities. The character of the Yiddish version is quite different: the author transformed the rather banal prose of the Italian original into 717 fluent *ottava rima* stanzas, in which the iambic meter is thoroughly adapted to conform with the nature and possibilities of the Yiddish

language. He divided the text in ten parts (*cantos*) which he named 'tailn', and elaborated, at the beginning of most of them, wide and poignant digressions on various topics, such as the nature and character of women, or the hospitality manners of the Jews of the Venetian ghetto. These digressions are attached to the plot in a very sophisticated manner and constitute an important element of the structural pattern of the work, which may still amuse the reader today.

Until now it was common opinion that the author of *Paris un' Viena* was Elye Bokher. After the discovery of a complete copy of the work, this conviction has started to weaken despite the indubitable dependence of the work on Elye Bokher's school. The author of *Paris un' Viena* does not hide his direct relation to Elye Bokher and his *Bovo-bukh*. He openly refers to him in the introduction in the manner of an admiring disciple who deeply mourns the death of his master. I accept the contents of this passage literally and do not consider it, as my colleague Erika Timm does, a mystification made by Elye Bokher himself. In my opinion there would be no reason for this mystification if Elye Bokher were himself the author. The anonymous author of *Paris un' Viena* should be looked for among Elye Bokher's disciples, that is, among those Italian Ashkenazi intellectuals of the 16th century who were already operating within the cultural boundaries of Christian society. Their dubious position must have given the author good reason for publishing his book anonymously. We must therefore establish that this work was written between 1549, the year of Elye Bokher's death, and 1556, the year of the first publication of *Paris un' Viena* (see No. \*91), an edition of which we have no record except for the lists of books submitted for Church censorship in Mantua (see No. 82).

There is no doubt that Elye Bokher's *Bovo-bukh*, which was written in 1507, was intended for the Yiddish readers who did not yet know the language of their new environment, but in the case of *Paris un' Viena* the situation is different. The anonymous author of this book wrote it for the sake of those Jewish readers who already knew Italian and could therefore read the well known story in the original and compare between both, the Italian and the Yiddish version. Yet the language he uses to write in is still Yiddish, and his great literary talent is certainly anchored in this language. He is well aware of the superiority of his version with respect to the original, is proud of it, and has indeed every right to be.

It is evident, that in the German speaking area a simple transliteration from *galkhes* into Hebrew characters was enough to open and expose the treasures of the literature of the environment to the Yiddish reader. In Italy, in contrast, not only a translation effort was necessary, but substantial adaptation skills and significant original creativity were needed as well in order to achieve the same aim. The outstanding remnants of these efforts, the *Bovo-bukh* by Elye Bokher, and *Paris un' Viena* by an anonymous writer, clearly attest to the great success of this apparently local, but most important and innovative school.

<sup>2</sup> See B. Hrushovsky, "The Creation of Accentual Iambic Feet in European Poetry and Their First Employment in a Yiddish Romance in Italy (1508-1509)", in

For Max Weinreich on his Seventieth Birthday: *Studies in Jewish Languages, Literature and Society*, The Hague 1964, pp. 108-146.

<sup>3</sup> See Erik, pp. 195-200.

It is in the rapid adaptation of the Ashkenazim to the language of the Italian environment that the fate of the survival of Yiddish in Italy, despite its flourishing literature, lies. I am afraid that by the last decade of the 16th century there were not many readers in Italy capable of appreciating the superiority of the Yiddish *Paris un' Viena* over its Italian original. As the lists of books submitted for censorship in Mantua in 1595 demonstrate, the number of readers of Italian amongst the Jewish public increased and, at the beginning of the 17th century, Yiddish books ceased to be published in Italy, where the language seems to have disappeared shortly afterwards.

The Ashkenazi Jewish community of Northern Italy was the first in the history of Yiddish to abandon its former spoken language. It did so more than a hundred years after its severance from the German-speaking environment occurred. However, those were years of intense and prolific literary creativity that has left behind a wonderful legacy, the full extent of which is still unknown. This heritage is indeed worthy of further intensive study and research, for the results will undoubtedly be of great interest not only for Renaissance scholars.

[Translated by Renata Casertano]

## LA LETTERATURA YIDDISH AL DI FUORI DEI CONFINI DELL'AREA DI LINGUA TEDESCA

Chone Shmeruk

La presenza dello yiddish nell'Italia settentrionale costituisce un capitolo relativamente breve nella storia articolata e multiterritoriale di questa lingua e della sua letteratura. Parliamo di un periodo che va dalla fine del XV secolo fino all'inizio del XVII; ci riferiamo in pratica soltanto al XVI secolo. Tuttavia a chiunque si occupi della letteratura yiddish nel suo complesso non può sfuggire la grande importanza di questo pur breve capitolo della sua storia, di un fenomeno che ha raggiunto un così alto livello di perfezione e che ha lasciato tracce tangibili per lungo tempo, anche al di là dei confini dell'Italia. Ancora oggi anzi è possibile fruire di risultati artistici così particolari.

Inoltre, se si giudica in base al numero, la quantità dei libri yiddish pubblicati in Italia non è certo notevole. Quando, nel 1982, ho pubblicato l'articolo bibliografico *La stampa yiddish in Italia*,<sup>1</sup> ho contati solo trentacinque tra libri e fascicoli, stampati a Venezia, Cremona, Mantova, Sabbioneta e Verona negli anni tra il 1545 ed il 1609. La lista contiene anche alcune ristampe. Purtroppo tredici di questi titoli (circa un terzo) non ci sono pervenuti: ne abbiamo perse le tracce, ma siamo al corrente della loro esistenza grazie a fonti indirette. Comunque anche in quei pochi libri che sono giunti fino a noi sono presenti elementi che ci colpiscono e ci commuovono ancora oggi. Alcuni sono diventati veri e propri pilastri della letteratura yiddish per diverse generazioni e alcune delle innovazioni letterarie che hanno avuto inizio in Italia nel '500, hanno nei secoli successivi avuto un seguito in altri paesi.

Prima di arrivare al punto principale, vorrei fare qualche breve osservazione sul carattere di queste innovazioni. La prosa narrativa yiddish ha infatti avuto inizio con i libri pubblicati in Italia. Già nel XVI secolo la ritroviamo in tutta la sua ricchezza nel progetto editoriale di Israel Cornelio Adelkind e di suo figlio Daniel. Ispirandosi a modelli italiani essi hanno pubblicato sotto forma di libricini dei racconti che sono stati poi la base del *Mayse-bikhl* che per secoli ha dominato la prosa yiddish. Questo modello letterario, il cui primo esempio sono le edizioni di Venezia del 1552 (cfr. nn. \*63, \*84, \*86-88), è ancora presente nello yiddish del XX secolo.

Tranne una sola eccezione, a Venezia ha avuto inizio anche la tradizione di inserire illustrazioni nei libri yiddish destinati principalmente ai ragazzi. Le belle e numerose illustrazioni del *Sefer Minhagim*, stampato a Venezia nel 1593 (cfr. n. \*41), non sono solo servite per le decine di edizioni che il libro ha avuto nei secoli successivi, in diverse aree della diaspora, ma hanno

anche ispirato le illustrazioni di molti altri libri, non solo in yiddish, che hanno attinto alla novità di quell'edizione veneziana. È un peccato che altre illustrazioni di libri yiddish di area italiana non siano stati oggetto di una simile costante attenzione. Possiamo infatti vedere, in quelle illustrazioni italiane, l'inizio dell'educazione estetica dei bambini ebrei, ai quali sarebbero mancati, altrimenti, per un periodo ancora lungo libri illustrati destinati specificamente a loro.

Ma al di là di queste innovazioni e di altri risultati raggiunti in Italia nel periodo in questione, la maggior gloria dell'ebraismo ashkenazita nell'ambito della letteratura yiddish è senz'altro la creazione della scuola del romanzo in ottava rima ad opera del famoso Elye Bokher (1468-1549). Sarebbe trattarsi di prestiti "dall'esterno", dalla cultura circostante, invece di fatto ci troviamo davanti opere letterarie originali e divertenti, che arricchiscono la letteratura yiddish fino a oggi. Cercherò, seppur brevemente, di parlarne e di metterle in luce l'essenza.

La nascita della lingua e della letteratura yiddish è avvenuta, come è noto, nel Medio Evo, nei paesi di lingua tedesca. Lì la lingua si è sviluppata sulla base del medio alto tedesco e dei suoi dialetti, e sempre lì la letteratura ha toccato le sue prime vette con la vasta epica biblica che ha cominciato a fiorire nella seconda metà del XIV secolo e che ha raggiunto la sua massima espressione nei famosi *Shmuel-bukh* e *Melokhim-bukh* e altre simili opere basate sulla Bibbia ebraica. In questo tipo di epica si vede bene la dipendenza degli autori da forme e contenuti tedeschi. Senza entrare nei particolari, si può affermare che la presenza e l'influsso dei modelli creativi tedeschi sono in vario modo facilmente osservabili nella letteratura yiddish di quell'epoca.

Al di là della letteratura originale in yiddish, il legame con la letteratura tedesca si è realizzato in un modo più diretto ed evidente nelle traslitterazioni di libri tedeschi, generalmente di diffusione popolare e di carattere laico. Gli ebrei dei paesi di lingua tedesca hanno completato la loro cultura ebraica tradizionale con generi letterari di intrattenimento che mancavano nel sistema culturale bilingue ebraico-yiddish, generi che venivano pertanto presi dalla letteratura narrativa della cultura circostante.

Nei paesi di lingua tedesca era sufficiente traslitterare le opere tedesche passando dalle lettere latine a quelle ebraiche per renderle accessibili ai parlanti yiddish, che non conoscevano le lettere latine, poiché queste si identificavano con la religione cristiana, come testimonia la definizione stessa della scrittura latina come *galkhes*, che significa "scrittura dei preti". Oltre alla

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. le traduzioni in inglese e in italiano di questo articolo nel Catalogo, pp. 171-190.