

WESTERN YIDDISH BERKHES OR BARKHES*, ITS ORIGIN AND OFFSHOOTS IN SCANDINAVIAN LANGUAGES

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It is a well-known fact that the bread term¹ mentioned in the heading has displaced and superseded in Western Yiddish the universal word for "sabbath bread" *khale*,² over which the benediction for bread is commonly though not necessarily pronounced.

It is likewise a universally accepted theory among serious scholars³ that the term *berkhes* — I prefer this form to *barkhes*, since it is, as will be shown further on in this paper, the older form — is connected with the Hebrew word for "benediction", among Ashkenazim pronounced *brokhe*, plural *brokhes*.

The nature of the connection is not clear, however, and the reason is twofold. First, neither of the two forms *brokhe*, *brokhes* seem to correspond very well to *berkhes*. There may have been metathesis of the *r*, but what about the *e* of the stressed syllable? A qamets cannot turn into an *e* without a plausible reason. And no such reason can be discerned.

The most important cause of this uncertainty on the part of scholars is, however, that nobody has bothered to go back to the oldest known documentation of the word — a piece of inexcusable negligence when it comes to serious etymological argumentation.

The scholar who has come nearest in this respect is S. A. Wolf. In his useful *Jiddisches Wörterbuch*⁵ he adduces from the year 1723 the compound *bercheskuchen*, documented in Frankfurt-am-Main.

In his kind reply to a letter from me requesting further information about *bercheskuchen*, Professor Wolf tells me that he believes that the compound is a pleonasm — since *berches* itself already means a "kuchen", a loaf.

Professor Wolf could not know — nor could I, at the date of our correspondence, November 1976 — that *bercheskuchen* is not a pleonasm at all. In his paper in *Sprachwart* on *barkhes*, reprinted here as an Appendix, Professor Wolf seems to be very near the truth, but the incompleteness of documentation prevented him from solving the problem once and for all.

Nodoby seems to have noticed that as early as in 1928, in his highly readable *Bilder fun der jiddischer Literatargeschichte*, Vilna, 1928, in Yiddish, the late Max Weinreich — treating the Yiddish MSS. of the Cambridge University Library and quoting as specimens of the contents a few passages from those MSS., among which one dated 1504 and entitled *Seder noshim*⁶ — happens to reproduce on page 116 a few lines from a rhymed wedding poem where our *berkhesukhen* appears. Until we get that ardently longed-for Historic Yiddish Dictionary, this instance of *berkhesukhen* will have to be considered as the oldest known.

A further advantage of this example is that it appears in Hebrew letters. In order to show how the word is spelt, I will first reproduce the MS. passage in cursive letters, in a facsimile, together with a transliteration in quadrangular print. The transliteration is based on Weinreich's text. I have made a few changes that mostly consist of dividing the lines according to rhyme, since we have to do with a rhymed poem, though written by the scribe as if it were prose. In order to facilitate comprehension for those who are not acquainted with Hebrew lettering, I will give a transcription in Latin letters trying to convey what I believe was the pronunciation of the language

at the period when the poem was written down. Finally an attempt will be made to translate the text for English or American readers unacquainted with Judeo-German.

As appears quite clearly from the cursive text in Hebrew letters, the scribe was among those who indicated the vowels in words which he considered non Yiddish, above all the majority of Hebrew terms, an instructive procedure, since it shows exactly from which of the four forms of the Hebrew noun for "benediction" — sing. *brokhe*, plur. *brokhes*, construct sing. *birkas*, plur. *birkhos* — our bread term is derived. Moreover, the scribe adopted the same system with other words which he considered strange, e.g. the many Romance words that occur in the poem.

There are quite a few details that need explaining in the passage reproduced above. But we shall have to dispense with them in this paper and concentrate on *berkhesukhen*.

First and foremost; there can be no doubt that we have here the origin of *berkhes*. The compound *berkhesukhen* is remarkable inasmuch as the Hebrew element appears in the construct or smikhut form of the *plural*. Why not in the singular or in the full form? Difficult to say as long as we have no thorough study of Yiddish word-formation in general and especially compounds of a Hebrew and a non-Hebrew element. The MS. text is not written by an ignoramus; his knowledge of Hebrew is quite extensive to judge from the rest. So we have to keep to the form just as it stands, with vowels and all.

The phonetic development leading from

Notes

* The digraph *kh* is used here for [X].

1 In actual Western Yiddish these two forms seem to be uniformly distributed over the territory. See map 1 in Dr. Steven Lowenstein's study *Results of Atlas Investigations among Jews of Germany in The Field of Yiddish III*, The Hague, 1969, p. 19: "Sabbath Bread". — Lowenstein's transcription using {ç}, i.e. the unvoiced prepalatal sound of German *ich*, "I", seems to be the pronunciation of the regions situated furthest west, whereas [x] seems to be that of the rest, including Berlin. I have not been able to check this distribution.

2 There exist two more synonyms in Europe, see the Appendix, in fine.

3 Only for the sake of curiosity should mention be

berkhos to *berkhes* in crystal-clear. The Teutonic goddess referred to in note 3 above will have to be banished to the ghostly haunt from where she should never have been allowed to come and invade the minds of some highly imaginative etymologists.

The compound accounts for the rather astonishing fact that a loaf of bread should be named "benedictions": originally there was not simply "benedictions" but "*bread* designed for benedictions". The compound term became subjected to ellipsis, as everybody knows a very common procedure by which the element of the compound is dropped which is felt to be superfluous by those who use the compound in everyday speech. Given the lack of documentation that prevails in our case, it is not easy to ascertain when that loss occurred, but the instance from 1723 of the full compound makes it probable that in the second part of the 18th century only *berkhes* remained.⁷

Speaking of *berkhes* and its diffusion all over the Western Yiddish territory, the attention of the Yiddishists should be drawn to the fact that our term has spread to Danish and Swedish.

In Danish the normal form is nowadays *birkes*. Formerly the form *berkes* was the one in use.⁸ In Swedish *berkhes* has been adopted in two forms. In the South-West it is *barkis*, in the South-East, mostly in Stockholm and its surroundings, it has become *bergis*.⁹ Both of the dictionaries referred to in notes 8 and 9 connect the word with the Hebrew term for "benediction".

6 As far as I can see, no mention is made of this made of a chimerical connection with a Germanic goddess Berchta, by whose worship medival German Jews are supposed to have been influenced. These aberrations seem to go back to a reference mentioned s.v. *Barches* in *Jüdisches Lexikon*, Berlin, 1925.

4 It is true that, originally, the so-called Sephardic pronunciation seems to have been the one used in Ashkenazic territories as well. But in our case the actual Ashkenazic pronunciation of Hebrew-Aramaic words in Yiddish had no doubt gained universal acceptance.

5 Mannheim, 1962. — For more extensive treatment see the Appendix printed at the end of this paper.

Top: Facsimile of part of Cambridge University Library MS. Or. Add. 547, fl. 79 v°.

Middle: Transliteration of the text in quadrangular print.

Bottom left: Transcription of the text. For practical reasons, and as this paper is also addressed to non Yiddishists, I have avoided using the scientific YIVO alphabet. Instead I have preferred some sort of Judeo-German spelling to indicate how I believe the text was pronounced at the time of its composition.

Bottom right: Translation of the text.

טַל אַיְיר

טוֹרָאָפֶס אַ וּשְׁוֹאָן הַפְּשָׁתָן אַ וְעַבְתָּן אַ וְיִאָמֵר
וְיַוְאָן דְּשָׁזְיַיְקָה בְּשַׁטְּפָה יַיְהָעָטָן אַ וְעַבְתָּן יַיְהָ
אַ וְלְאַנְגָּעָן אַוְמָרָיְמָטָטָן אַ וְיַרְאָה שְׂוֹאָה גִּינְזָבָן
אַיְדָיְיַיְקָה אַ וְלְוָטָן אַ וְאַוְדָה גַּוְמָפְּטָהָן קְלָבָה אַיְזָרָן זַיְהָ
גִּינְזָבָן וְעַטְוָן טַן פְּטָמִיק אַוְיָס רַעֲבָה שְׁוֹיָהָן . גַּשְׁבָּיְזָיְהָ
בְּאַלְגָּעָן וְתָהָא אָרָן אַיְרָאָיְסָלָט אַנְדָּמָחָקָה קְרָעָן
הַהָּאַוְתָּן קְרָעָן אַהֲרָן גַּוְלָגִין וְלְאָהָרָן אָרָן גַּוְלָגִין תָּאַבְּלָה
עַן אַיְרָאָיְלָהָרָן אָרָן גַּוְלָגִין נְאָהָרָן אַוְשָׁטָהָרָן וְיִזְרָעָה
וְעַטָּהָרָן אַיְרָאָיְלָהָרָן גַּוְלָגִין זַיְהָאָמָהָרָן פְּרָוָעָה

זו אַיְינְדָר בְּרוֹזִילְפֶט זַוְעָן סָאָן רַוְפֶט צָו זְלַעְבְּטָן
זַזְיָ גַּעֲרָן נִיְזָזָאָךְ זַיְהָדָק נְשַׁעְפְּטִיק סְעַבְטִין .

זַא חַטְרָיְן זַיְהָאָל דָא הַעֲרָאוּם דִי בְּרוֹזִידָר .

אַיְרָאָיְנְשְׁטִילְלָה זִינְגָּאָן אַיְרָגָּאָר לְוִיטָה זַיְהָאָהָוְפֶטָן בְּלַהֲלִידָר ,

5. דִי זִינְגָּט בְּנִינְגָּסָן בְּזָוָן פְּסֻקִים אַזְוִישׁ דָעַר שִׁידָר ,

דַּשְׁ זַיְהָזָול הַלְּטָן גִּינְדָּה אָזָן , אַיְרָלְיִבְטָר צָו אַנְצָוְנָדָן ,

גַּעַמְן תְּלָהָאָזָן , צָו סָאָבָן דְּרִיאָא בְּגַבּוֹתָקָבָן דָוָנָן ,

דַּשְׁ זַיְהָזָול נִיְתָן גַּזְלָה זִינְיָן וְזַרְכָד

אָזָן , זַוְל בְּלַד אַוְיְשָׁטָן אַיְרָהָעָט

10 אָזָן , זַוְל זַיְהָזָל נִיְתָן זָאָשָׁט דְּרוֹזְוִידָר זַוְעָרָן ,

דִי עַרְשָׁט בְּעַט זַוְל זַיְהָזָל אִין יָא בְּלַד נִיְזָזָרָן .

zu einer brojluft wenn man ruft zu flechtn,
wie gern niwach dass sie sich gescheftik mechtn!
So schtten sie all da herum die brojt.
Ihr einsteils singen ihr gar lojt

5 die allrhubscht kalâ-lidr,
die seint genumen fun psukim ojs der siddr:
dass sie soll haltn nida un ihr lichtr zu anzündn,
zu nemn chalo un zu machn drei bi(e?)rchos-
kuchen dünen,
dass sie ihrm man nit soll sein frö(e?)md

10 un soll bald ojston ihr hemd,
un soll sich nit drwidr wehrn:
die erscht bet soll sie ihn ja bald gewehrn...

at a wedding when the guests are called to the ceremony of braiding,
lo, how — a shame! — they keep fussing about!

All crowd around the bride.
Some sing loudly unto her

5 the very nicest wedding songs
consisting of sentences taken from the prayer-book,
urging her to keep *nido* and to light her candles,
to take of *khalo* and to bake three thin "benediction-loaves",

and that she must not rebuff her husband
10 and that she should not be long in taking off
her shirt,
and not put up undue resistance
but accede willingly to his first request ...

interesting though somewhat truncated MS. by Helmut Dinse and Sol Liptzin in their *Einführung in die jiddische Literatur*, Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Stuttgart, 1978, chapter II:2 Frauenliteratur.

7 The shortened form occurs as early as 1619, see *Jüdische Privatbriefe aus dem Jahre 1619* (ed. A. Landau, Wien 1911, p. 117, Glossary).

8 In Danish words borrowed from German, *k* is the normal realization of the guttural *kh*, a sound which does not exist in Scandinavian languages.

— For more details see *Ordbog over det danske*

sprog, vol. II, Copenhagen, 1920, s.v. Berkes.

9 See Hellquist, E., *Svensk etymologisk ordbok*, first edition Lund, 1922, s.v. *bergis*. Hellquist informs us that the names *bergis* and *barkis* are still in use among the Jewish families who have immigrated into Sweden from Germany, but that they are unknown among Jews from Eastern Europe. The words, Hellquist adds, are little heard outside Stockholm, Gothenburg and Norrköping, the cities where the Jews were initially allowed to settle.

Appendix

Barches

Siegmond A. Wolf, Berlin

In den Bäckereien einiger Grossstädte konnte man bis zum Jahr 1933 vornehmlich an Freitagen zöpfartig geflochtene Weissbrote liegen sehen, an denen „Barches“ stand. Sie verschwanden dann, sind aber seit wenigen Jahren z. B. in Berlin ~~mitsamt~~ dem Schildchen „Barches“ wieder aufgetaucht. Es ist nicht ganz einfach, sich über Bedeutung und Namen des Gebäcks zu unterrichten. Die Verkäuferinnen zucken verlegen die Schultern, wenn man sie fragt, ob es eigentlich der, die, das oder die (Mehrzahl) Barches heisst. Die Bände „Rechtschreibung“ des Dudens (¹⁵ Mannheim 1961, ¹⁵ Leipzig 1957) schweigen sich gleichfalls aus. Dagegen weiss das „Fremdwörterbuch“ des Dudens (Mannheim 1960), dass Barches ein Maskulinum ist und „weisses Sabbatbrot der Juden“ bedeutet. Und das „Fremdwörterbuch“ (Leipzig 1954) belehrt uns, dass Barches ein Plural ist und dass die „israelitischen Sabbatbrote“ so heissen. Beide Bücker geben übereinstimmend und mit schöner Selbstsicherheit ferner an, es handele sich um ein „hebr.“ Wort.

Die Frage, ob Barches ein Maskulinum Singularis oder ein Plural (Genus?!?) ist, lässt sich nur gemeinsam von der Sache und von der Etymologie her entscheiden. Der erste Punkt ist für jeden auch nur oberflächlich ins jüdische Brauchtum Eingeführten völlig klar: Für das Segnen („Kiddusch machen“) am Sabbat-Tisch wird mehrmals Brot gebraucht. Das würde dafür sprechen, dass es sich bei Barches um einen Plural handelt. Auch die Synonyme für Barches, das gleich der zumindest genauso verbreiteten Form Berches vornehmlich auf Deutschland beschränkt ist, treten grammatisch als Plural auf. So die „Challos“ oder die „Kojletschess“, über die man in Osteuropa Kiddusch macht. Das erste Wort (Challos) ist der Plural des jidd. Femininums *challa* = Kuchen, das zweite (Kojletschess) der jidd. Plural des poln.,

aber seit langem vom Jidd. entlehnten Maskulinums *kolacz* = geflochtene Weissbrotorte. (Selbstverständlich identisch mit der in Österreich eingedeutschten Kolatsche oder Golatsche.)

Der zweite Punkt, der etymologische, ist bei weitem nicht so einfach zu lösen. Nur als Kuriosum sei vermerkt, dass 1884 sogar die Göttin Berchte der germanischen Mythologie als Namengeberin des jüdischen Sabbatbrotes bemüht wurde. Auf der andern Seite erscheint es heute unklar, warum eigentlich jidd. *b'rocho* f., *brochos* Pl. = Segen nur recht zögernd als Etymon anerkannt worden ist. Denn es kann z. B. sehr wenig stören, dass *b'rocho* in podolisch-wolhynischen Dialekt des Jiddischen die Form *b'ruchu* (Pl. *b'ruchjoss*) hat, da ihr das hebr. *birkat* gegenübersteht. Zu letzterem passt jidd. Berches ganz vorzüglich. Barches schält sich also inhaltlich als eine Art von *totum pro parte* heraus: Für den Akt des Segnens, für die Segenssprüche, d. h. vom Ganzen ist das Wort auf die dafür benötigten Brotschnitten übergegangen. Semantisch und etymologisch ist Barches also der Plural eines Femininums. Grammatisch ist der Duden (Fremdwörterbuch) zweifellos im Unrecht. Ob er sein Maskulinum „der Barches“ durch den lebendigen Sprachgebrauch begründen kann, ist dagegen zweifelhaft. Allerdings liesse sich der Barches, der Berches als Kurzwort für „der Bercheskuchen“ (1723 in Frankfurt a. M. belegt) verteidigen. Übrigens wurde die korrekte Pluralform „die Barches“ zumindest in Berlin etwa um 1850 herum noch verstanden. Sie findet sich damals in einer Neuauflage des jedoch weit früher erstmals gedruckten „Reb Henoch“, eines bitterböse persiflierenden Schauspiels aus jüdischer Feder.

Ganz interessant ist ein weiterer, aber schon selten gewordener Ausdrück für das Sabbatbrot. Wir mei-

nen „Datscher“ oder auch „Taatscher“. Datscher hat z. B. der um die jüdische Folklore hochverdiente A. M. Tendlau (geb. Wiesbaden 1802, gest. das. 1878) notiert und besprochen. Aber seine Etymologien halten vielfach heute nicht mehr stand, was auch für seine Ableitungserwägungen zu Datscher gilt.

In dem Wort steckt nichts weiter als die Tasche, mdal. die Tätsche, d. h. die Ohrfeige. Synonyme sind Maultasche und Maulschelle. Als Maulschelle bezeichnete man aber in Mitteldeutschland noch vor zwanzig Jahren ein billigeres, meistens mit Mus gefülltes süßes Gebäck, ein sogenanntes Secher- oder

auch Groschenstück. Ähnlich waren wohl die anderswo mdal. Tatschkerln genannten Teigtaschen, die mit Pflaumenmus gefüllt waren. Bei dem Datcher oder Taatscher hat es sich also auch nur um ein etwas feineres Gebäck fürs sabbatische Kidduschmachen gehandelt, dessen Name gar nichts Rätselhaftes birgt.

Für die Wortgeographie wäre es übrigens von einigem Belang, zu wissen, wo heute noch oder wieder Barches (Berches) gebacken und angeboten werden, wenngleich Versäumnisse der Vergangenheit gerade auf diesem Gebiet kaum noch aufzuholen sind.