

PENT NURMEKUND AS THE TRANSLATOR OF YIDDISH FOLKSONGS INTO ESTONIAN

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One can often hear the question: are there any Jews in Estonia at all? And if there are, is there any reason to speak about Estonian Jewry in the sense we speak about Polish, Lithuanian, Galitian Jewry? Indeed, Estonia has never been a »traditional« land of Jews: during the Russian rule it did not belong to the so-called pale of settlement. In 1820 there were only 36 Jewish residents, yet the number of Jews kept constantly increasing and reached 1523 by 1918, in 1922 there were registered 1929 and in 1934 - 4389 Jews (Juudi vähemusrahvuse statistika Eestis: 1935). Estonia never met with the »Jewish question«, there was no ground either for everyday or for official anti-semitism. In 1918 Estonia became an independent state for the first time in its history, the struggle of this small people to be a nation helped to recognize the similar needs of Estonia's minorities, so in 1925 the right of every minority for cultural autonomy was enacted by law. It allowed to each minority living in the country to preserve its ethnical and religious identity, to receive an education in mother-tongue, to establish its own cultural institutions, etc. The way how the problem of minorities had been solved in the Republic of Estonia was exemplary for other countries (Encyclopaedia Judaica 1930: 814, The Jewish Encyclopedia 1901: 477-478). It is worth mentioning that the Department of Jewish Studies in the University of Tartu was the first one of this kind in the Nordic countries. Jewish students were quite numerous in the University, they had several organizations (Limuvia, Hasmonaea and Hazfiro). At that time it was not unusual that an Estonian understood some Yiddish, there are also examples of the students who studied seriously the language and the culture of Jews. Pent Nurmekund, a famous polyglot, was one of them. In 1930-ties while studying Germanic languages he got acquainted with Elija Levenberg, an Estonian Jew, who was a student at the University and teacher of Yiddish in Tartu Jewish Grammar School. Mr. Levenberg was an active member of the club »Fraint fun jidiš« and thus a convinced Yiddishist. Thank to Levenberg P. Nurmekund became interested in Yiddish, so he learned the language and was introduced by Levenberg to the local Jewish community. P. Nurmekund also learned a number of Yiddish folksongs and later translated some of them into Estonian. He is also an excellent performer; the recording of 9 Yiddish folksongs sung by Nurmekund is the only one the Folklore Archive possesses (RMK Mgn II 3207, No. 15-24).

The two songs we are going to speak about are »Toibn« and »Main fraint«. P. Nurmekund performed both a Yiddish and an Estonian version of the first song: »Toibn« (»Doves«) and »Valge tuvipaar« (»A Pair of White Doves«). »Main fraint« was recorded only in Yiddish, the Estonian translation was published in the literary periodical »Looming« (Nurmekund 1984: 1951).

I. Toibn

Toibn štejen bai main fenster,
vaise toibn tsvei.
Efenen vel ix dos fenster,
efenen far zej.

In main štiln einzam tsimer
vorken, vorken zej.
Vorken veln in main tsimer
vaise toibn tsvei.

In der naxt fun šver un umet
vorken veln zej.
Vorken veln in main tsimer
vaise toibn tsvei.

TOIBN

Toi - bn šte-jen bai main fenster, vaise toibn tsvei,
efenen vel ix dos fenster, efenen far zej. efenen far zej.

Translation:

Doves

Two doves stand by my window, / two white doves. /
I want to open the window, / to open it for them. //
In my silent lonely room / they coo, (they) coo, /
they will coo in my room, / two white doves. //
In the night of grief and sorrow / they coo, (they) coo. /
They will coo in my room, / two white doves.

Valge tuvipaar

Tuvid seisavad mu aknal -
valge tuvipaar.
Avada ma tahan akna,
neile avada.

Minu kambri üksilduses
kudrutavad nad.
Kudrutab mu toakeses
valge tuvipaar.

Raskeil igatsuse öödel
kudrutavad nad.
Kudrutab mu toakeses
valge tuvipaar.

Translation

The Pair of White Doves

Doves stand by my window, / a pair of white doves. /
I want to open the window, / to open for them. //
In the loneliness of my room / they coo. /
The pair of white doves / coo in my little room. //
In the hard nights of longing / they coo, /
In my little room / the pair of white doves coo.

As one can notice, the translation of the song has been done in such a way that the song is singable in Estonian as well: the rhythm of the Yiddish original has been preserved, rhymes are simple and natural as they usually are in folksongs and folklore-translations, so P. Nurmekund has excellently succeeded in rendering the style of the song. The transcription shows that »Toibn« was performed in standard Yiddish with no deviations.

The second song, »Main fraint«, is definitely of literary origin, unfortunately Mr. Nurmekund does not know the name of the author (Nurmekund 1992).

II. Main frait

Du frekst mix, main frait [froit],
vi alt bin ix šoin. [alt bin]
Ix volt es dir gern dertseiln.
Nor gloib mix, main frait, [nur]
ix veis nit alein,
es hot nit geloint zix tsu tseiln. [zix]

Der karger tseilt gelt,
der glikliker teg.
Men tseilt vos iz lib un vos taier.
Main lebn, main frait,
iz a vist langer veg,
un punkt far a jorn vi hai-jor.

Oib lebn heist laibn,
dan leb ix šoin lang,
dan hob ix genug zej, di jorn.
Oib lebn heist hern
fun glik xotš a klan,
dan bin ix nor gornit geborn.

MAIN FRAINT

du fregst mix, main frait, vi alt bin ix šoin, ix volt es dir ge-ru der

sei-en. Nor gloib mix, main frait, ix veis nit a-lein. ix hot nit ge-

loibt zix thu sei-en.

Translation:

My friend

You ask me, my friend, / how old I am already. /
I would tell you kindly. / But believe me, my friend, /
I don't know myself. / I have not managed to count. //
(The) miser counts money, / the happy man (counts) days. /
One counts what is lovely and dear. / My life, my friend, /
is a boring long way, / just the same last year and this year. //
If life means to suffer, / then I've lived already long, /
then I've got many of them, the years. / If life means to hear /
just a sound of happiness, / then I have not been born at all.

Here we can hear some deviations from Yiddish pronunciation, which in some cases can be explained by the singer's knowledge of German and in other cases should be regarded as a foreign accent. We hardly have to do with the influence of different Yiddish dialects: Estonian Jews spoke (and some speak today) either the North-Eastern dialect or the standard language, so Mr. Nurmekund could not have been influenced by the Southern dialect. Thus, *nur* instead of *nor* is an example of German influence, not of Southern pattern *o > u*. [zix] instead of [zex] and *froit* instead of *fraint* (cf. German *Freund*) are also the result of interference. The lack of voicing assimilation (Katz 1987:30) [alt bin] for [ald bin] and [klan] instead of [klang] (Weinreich 1987:21) are phenomena of foreign accent.

As we have already mentioned, »Main fraint« is undoubtedly of literary origin, though the motif of »jorn« - years, brief human life etc. is widely spread in Jewish folklore (cf. songs »Dem milners trenn«, »Kinderjorn«, »Afn brik, untern brik«). While reading P. Nurmekund's translation one can notice that the approach to the text differs much from that in the case of »Toibn«. The Estonian version is certainly a poem, not a song. The metre has been changed and the stanza has now four verses instead of six.

Üits küsumüs

Sia küssüt miult, miu ammuaigne sõper,
kupailu miul küll aastit olla võiss.
Täät esiki, eṭ põle mia viil nõter,
mis kassu sest, ku pärle loessi neit?

Ihnuskoi loep näppe vahel raha,
loep päivi sii, kel pailu õnne om.
Miu elutii - üits lõput kõrberada -
ei täämpe egä omse vahet tii.

Kui elü oss ütsainus vaivarada,
sõs elä mia kül aastatuhandid.
Ku aga kuulmin õnnest kave ütteg sõna,
sõs põle mia viil ilmä sündindkid.

Translation:

You ask me, my old friend,/ how old I could be./
You know yourself that I am not yet weak, /
so what is the use of counting those pearls? //
A skinflint counts money in his hands, /
one who is very happy counts days. /
My path of life is an endless desert road. /
There is no difference between today and tomorrow.//
If life were only a way of trouble, /
then I have been living for thousands of years. /
But if (life were) to hear just one word about happiness, /
then I have not yet been born into the world.

It should be emphasized that »Main fraint« was not translated into standard Estonian, but into Mulgi dialect, P. Nurmekund's mother tongue. The dialect is quite different from standard Estonian; although poetry in various dialects is not an unusual phenomenon in the history of Estonian literature, a text written in dialect has still some additional effect upon a reader, because it is not always completely understandable, for instance to a person from the Northern part of Estonia. This effect is doubled when the reader learns that the poem has been translated into Mulgi dialect from Yiddish, quite an exotic language for Estonians.

I would like to conclude this article with the words Mr. Nurmekund told me after he had learned that I was going to write about his translations: »I am very glad that you pay attention to what I have done as a mediator between two cultures, though I have not done much«.

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