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Tuwim's Wedge: "Survival Strategies" of a Polish-Jewish Poet

A Christian will sell trousers. 38 Krucza Street.

[...]

A Jew will buy trousers. 38 Krucza Street.

Antoni Słonimski, Julian Tuwim,

W oparach absurdu

A poet who strolls...

From the very beginning of his poetic career, Tuwim's lyrical subject strolled around the city in search of spontaneous adventures. The idly wandering poet, walking "straight ahead", "with wind in his face", sometimes walking with "Gulliver's gait", is like the XX century flâneur with free time. Sometimes, however, his "idyllic walk" or whitmanian lively gait turns into roaming "sad and mad", leaving just inert footprints behind.

Tuwim's characters, ingenious poets-vagrants-rogues – like a Socrates of the devil in the rooms of the Vatican – sometimes walk sideways, "crosswise" or "dogwise". In the wake of a visit by some "unpleasant guest" the gait of one of them changes again into "steps from the edge of a precipice".

Tuwim liked to present his doppelganger as a man of the street, not belonging to any specific community, lonely and free, watching the life of a big city, sometimes full of awe, sometimes critical. It's another mask – the poet sometimes played the role of a jester, a buffoon – one that allowed him to highlight **his own** attitude towards his surroundings and convey the satiric image of his era.

We can interpret this as a sign of a voluntary and "unusually skilled" being beyond and "in between". Between Polish tradition and the world of the European

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avant garde. Between elevation and triviality. Between the Polish and Jewish communities (it's worth noting that in the end none of them saw him as one of their own because he didn't want to belong solely to any one of them). There are many other "in betweens".

Self-fashioning

All of Polish culture's important characters of Jewish descent had to struggle with their own national identity. It was the result of strong social pressure denying them the right to define themselves as having multi-ethnic identity (what Janusz Korczak described as "being chequered"¹ – I will come back to that brilliant metaphor in a moment). At that time, the virtues of multinationality were not highly valued in the Second Polish Republic: the contribution of racial minorities – especially the Jewish – to Polish culture was commonly seen as a dangerous contamination.

One of the few Poles who relentlessly advocated cultural and linguistic pluralism, the feeling of solidarity and community of nations living on the same piece of land was Korczak. His "bold plan to rebuild the world" initially aimed at accepting cultures and languages and at creating a new, pluralistic form of being a Pole.

I'd like to write a few words about a very interesting (sadly, rather obscure) novella, which I mentioned before. *Pieśń wiosenna* (*Song of the Spring*) was published in "Herold Polski" in 1906. It contains elements surprisingly ahead of Gombrowicz's characters' provocations. One beautiful spring day an anonymous protagonist-narrator approaches different people sitting on a bench in "the Avenues", displaying rhetorical appeals for mutual love in the family and society. When asked by one of them about whether he is "white or red", he unexpectedly answers that he is "chequered" thus provoking the other to state that it is exactly that type of "chequered people" that he is afraid of².

Such an unconventional character is also a man from "beyond". I think that the art of being "chequered" advocated by Korczak, i.e. harmonising the different

¹ See my article about Korczak: G. Tomassucci, "Io sono a scacchi". *L'identità ebraica nell'opera letteraria e teatrale di Janusz Korczak* ["I am chequered". Jewish identity and literary and theatrical works of Janusz Korczak], in: *Janusz Korczak, il suo tempo e il suo retaggio*, L. Battaglia, L. Quercioli Mincer (eds.), Università di Genova, Genoa 2014 ["Quaderni di Palazzo Serra" 24], pp. 148–167.

² J. Korczak, *Pieśń wiosenna*, in: *Koszalki opalki. Humoreski i felietony* [*Dziela*, vol. 2], H. Kirchner (ed.), compilation and footnotes by B. Wojnowska, Oficyna Wydawnicza Latona, Warsaw 1998, vol. II, p. 19.

elements in one's dual identity (ethnic, cultural, sometimes linguistic) was very difficult and therefore hardly ever practised in Poland in the XX century. It was expected of writers, especially those of Jewish descent, that they should polonise entirely and reject their Jewish identities on the one hand, and, on the other, in the name of "cultural cleansing", they were refused a place among "Polish artists" for racial or stylistic-linguistic reasons.

According to the very deep conviction of a number of Poles, Jewishness was a form of disability, which it was unseemly to bring up. For that reason, Polish writers of Jewish descent, seeking reconciliation between the Polish and the Jewish, had to build a specific reputation for themselves, they had to self-fashion. It does not mean, however, that they rejected important aspects of their dual personalities. In "the homeland [where] to those of different faith / God does not come" (as Antoni Słonimski wrote in *Dwie ojczyzny* [*Two homelands*]), where anti-Semites denounce Jewish "literary bastardisms"³ and where Jewish nationalists accuse you of renouncing "your belonging to the Jewish nation"⁴ any "highlighting of one's independence"⁵ or even just taking interest in Jewish culture could have resulted in a witch-hunt or manipulation (Korczak is a noble example of going against the trend). Moreover, I believe that everyone used their own "survival strategy" and auto-censorship, since the position of a Polish-Jewish writer who did not belong to the Jewish nationalist community, or did not sympathise with Yiddish culture, implied an entirely individual (not collective) approach to coming to terms with one's own identity (this is why the first person plural was so rarely used).

In 1924 Tuwim said in an interview that: "For me the Jewish dilemma is a tragedy in which I myself am one of the nameless actors."⁶ When you consider the fact that so many remained silent about the Jewish question – especially in the case of Tuwim or Słonimski – the concept of *Selbsthass*, i.e. hatred towards oneself, or the concept of autodemonsiation used by Sandauer will not be very helpful in interpreting Tuwim's attitude.

One of the reactions was to radically identify with cosmopolitanism and contest all nationalist rhetoric. Słonimski declared in 1932:

³ Such an opinion was expressed by K.H. Rostworowski. As cited in: S.J. Imber, *Rekapitulacja, czy kapitulacja?*, in: *Asy z czystej rasy*, Biblioteka S.J. Imbera, Cracow 1934, p. 53.

⁴ K.H. Rostworowski, *O sanację literatury polskiej* (a lecture from 1929). As cited in: S.J. Imber, *Co nam i tobie Tuwimie...? (Z powodu odczytu K.H. Rostworowskiego pt. "O sanację literatury polskiej")*, in: *Asy z czystej rasy*, p. 40 (first printing of the discussion of S.I. Imber with K.H. Rostworowski: "Nowy Dziennik" 1929, issues 343–346 [22 and 25.12.1929]).

⁵ S. Leben, *Luminarze literatury i nauki polskiej o kwestii żydowskiej*, in: *Rozmowy z Tuwimem*, T. Januszewski (ed.), Semper, Warsaw, 1994, p. 15. (first printing: *Luminarze literatury i nauki polskiej o kwestii żydowskiej. Ankieta "Naszego Przeglądu"*. Julian Tuwim, "Nasz Przegląd" 1924, issue 6 [06.01.1924]). See also A. Hertz, *Żydzi w kulturze polskiej*, Margines, Warsaw 1988, p. 257.

⁶ S. Leben, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

The law and the constitution allow secularity. Could it also be that secularity is forbidden in the case of national matters? Is it really necessary to love just one of the two chosen nations, i.e. the Poles or the Jews? Too little choice, gentlemen!⁷

Tuwim was, however, far from such an approach. He not only highlighted his Polishness, but also did not hesitate to underline that Jewishness was an important part of his own identity. Similarly to Slonimski, he saw that being a Polish Jew is not only something to be proud of, but also something that one should be critical of: not only for defying the opinion of Poles, whom they lived among, but also for imitating them too blindly.

Tuwim's remarks from the interwar period, as well as his piece *My, żydzi polscy* (*We, Polish Jews*), suggest that he often associated being a member of the Jewish community with blood and suffering. Initially, blood, as a vibrant element of his temperament, bound him "to Israel" with the power of "'mystical' reflexes"⁸, later a blood oath appeared: "hot, bloody brotherhood of martyrdom with the Jews" (*We, the Polish Jews*). Another metaphor that he used was the ambivalent and auto-ironic image of a wedge (in Polish the word is used in an idiomatic phrase meaning *to baffle somebody*):

For me [...] the question of Jewishness is in my blood, it is an element of my psyche. It forms as if a powerful wedge cutting into my worldview, into my personal, most intimate experiences⁹.

Perhaps there are some texts seemingly not connected with discrimination that pertain to this wedge? One poem comes to mind: *Garbus* (*Hunchback*)¹⁰, a light-hearted poem that Tuwim was very attached to, published in "Skamander" in 1922

Beautiful cloth on the neck,
But what would I do with it when I'm a hunchback?
In that which looks like a silvery sail
I would look fit
But to no avail:
No one would notice it

⁷ A. Slonimski, *Moje walki nad Bzdurą*, Towarzystwo Wydawnicze "Rój", Warsaw 1932, p. 141.

⁸ D. Silberberg, *Godzina z Julianem Tuwimem. Rozmowa o Żydach i zagadnieniach literackich*, in: *Rozmowy z Tuwimem*, p. 54 (first printing: "Nasz Przegląd" 1935, issue 46 [15.02.1935]).

⁹ S. Leben, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Along with *Hunchback* Tuwim also liked: *Dzieciństwo, W Barwistanie, My ludzie* – see Znamor [R. Zrębowicz], *U Juliana Tuwima*, in: *Rozmowy z Tuwimem*, p. 19 (first printing: "Wiadomości Literackie" 1926, issue 5).

May it be made of rainbow,
 May it be of parrots colour,
 No one will say; "What a beautiful tie!"
 Everyone will say: "What a terrible hump!"

I need a long scarf,
 The most glorious scarf!
 I'll do it so well,
 No one will be able to tell
 If it's me – Oh, oh – you'll sigh –
 What a hump!
 But... why are you hanging – on the tie?

J. Tuwim, *Hunchback*¹¹

Is this poem an allusion to the mole on the poet's cheek? Or is it about Jewishness experienced as a burden of tragic distinctiveness and disability? Marian Hemar wrote about it in an explicit and unambiguous way in 1935:

You could say I daintily stroll,
 Sadly, I still recall:
 A Jew.
 What to do? It's not nice
 Look the NDs in the eyes –
 Shame.
 I pretend to be an Aryan! I'm not a Marian!
 A hymie!!!
 [...]

M. Hemar, *Cordial pain with prudence withheld*¹²

It is obvious that Tuwim could not suppress his memories of his roots nor of the tragedy of his nation. He said himself that he constantly considered his own attitude towards the Jewish matter¹³. It can be clearly seen in the beautiful poem *Żydek (Kike)*, in which his own quandary becomes dually embodied by a polonized

¹¹ J. Tuwim, *Garbus*, in: *Dziela*, vol. I: *Wiersze*, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1955, vol. 1, p. 254 [*The forth volume of poems*, first printing: "Skamander" 1922, issues 25–26, p. 474].

¹² M. Hemar, *Ból serdeczny, rozwagi wstrzymywany siłą*, in: J. Winczakiewicz, *Izrael w poezji polskiej. Antologia*, Instytut Literacki, Paris 1958, p. 318 (first printing: "Wiadomości Literackie" 1935, issue 44, p. 8).

¹³ S. Leben, *op. cit.*, p. 14. The poet confirmed that in an interview with D. Silberberg, mentioning that his opinion of Jews and Zionism changed over time (see D. Silberberg, *op. cit.*, p. 54).

man from the first floor and a young beggar-*Meshugenah*¹⁴. Is also shows in his exchanges with Pienkowski and Wasilewski, there is the “catalogue” of anti-Semitic nonsense in the *Anonimowe mocarstwo* (*Anonymous power*), there are the poems not published in his lifetime, there is the *Juvenilia* and the texts from Tomasz Niewodniczanski’s collections¹⁵ and absurd advertisements showing the absurdity of the Polish *Apartheid*¹⁶. It is much more important than the fact that – as recalled by Artur Sandauer and Aleksander Hertz – Tuwim “knew very little” about the complex structure of the Polish-Jewish community and was not very interested in it¹⁷.

Polish-Jewish writers and artists usually not only decided to hide their Jewishness – they also abandoned their close and more distant orthodox ancestors. Their family memories reached only till the time of the assimilation of their families (or their own, as was in the case of Adolf Rudnicki). The attitudes of Aleksander Wat, and Janusz Korczak (who wrote of his grandfather, Hersh Goldschmidt’s, past in a fairytale-like manner in his novels *Herszele* and *Trzy Wyprawy Herszka* [1939]) were a significant exception. As for the rest, everything that took place before the exodus from the so-called “ghetto” – before “year zero” – was almost always ignored and depreciated.

In Polish society, where the gentry were obsessed with their genealogy, a person without documented heritage was suspicious. In Polish literature a “man without a name, without his ancestry, without his guardian angel – a man who came from nothingness” is a revolutionary and an ally of converted Jews, Pankracy. The lack of roots also amplifies the feeling of emptiness. We know that the condition of a modern Jew is the condition of an outsider, an alienated parvenu. In his *Diaries* Franz Kafka mentions life:

Without forebears, without marriage, without heirs, with a fierce longing for forebears, marriage, and heirs. All of them stretch out of their hands to me: forebears, marriage, and heirs, but too far away for me.¹⁸

¹⁴ See the last stanza of the poem fraternising with “the provincial poet”, rummaging in “his dark Cabala”: “Be my friend / Oh, you, so proficient in cabal! / Come tonight. I’m waiting, for you, / You poet-provincial!” (J. Tuwim, *O poecie*, in: *Dzieła*, vol. I: *Wiersze*, vol. 2, p. 18 [*Rzecz czarnońska*, first printing: “Skamander” 1926, issue 47–48, p. 132]. Tuwim performed it in the interview for “Literary Bletter” (1926), by Sz.L. Sznajderman – see K. Szymaniak, *Odpytywanie Tuwima. O pewnym wywiadzie z międzywojnia*, http://www.jhi.pl/uploads/image/file/4373/full_hd__78B9289.jpg [accessed on: 15.02.2014] and P. Matywiecki, *Twarz Tuwima*, W.A.B., Warsaw 2007, p. 249.

¹⁵ See J. Tuwim, *Utwory nieznanne. Ze zbiorów Tomasza Niewodniczańskiego w Bitburgu. Wiersze, kabaret, artykuły, listy*, compilation by T. Januszewski, Wydawnictwo Wojciech Grochowalski, Lodz 1999, pp. 83–90.

¹⁶ “Miejsce w osiemnastce na przedniej platformie do odstąpienia zaraz. Pocielski, plac Zbawiciela. Tylko dla chrześcijan” (A. Słonimski, J. Tuwim, *W oparach absurdu*, Wydawnictwo Iskry, Warsaw 2008, p. 115).

¹⁷ A. Hertz, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

¹⁸ F. Kafka, *Dzienniki 1910–1923*, translated by J. Werter, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Cracow 1961, p. 428.

That feeling can be further exacerbated by the sight of starkly contrasting gaberdine-clad Jews, reminiscent of the disliked and "suppressed" ancestors... It could explain why Tuwim mercilessly satirised long-tailed caftans and side curls, the "black Hasidic mob", the "Hebrew-German mess" and the garbling of the Polish language...

But not all Jewish tradition was disgusting to Tuwim. Antoni Słonimski, who came from the very same Hrubieszów as the Goldszmidts, discovered the poetry of the shtetl only after it had been destroyed (partly because he met Icyk Manger in London, a famous Jewish poet who lived in Warsaw before the war but never met the Skamandites). Tuwim, however, referred to its tradition in a slightly joking manner by describing the life of Jankiel Wasserstein, a fiddler and a "first-class rowdy" from a market in Będzin, emigrating to Warsaw and New York and becoming the "king of a Jazz Band", playing the charleston. In the song *The town of Będzin* (1930) that symbolic character (having some traits in common with the brilliant musician, Menuchim, from the novel of Joseph Roth *Hiob*, published in the same year) changes his name to Jan Wodnicki and then to John Waterstone, but despite his great career does not forget about the golden chain connecting him to his forebears. The friendly Jankiel-Janek-John says, giving his son his violin:

Don't be afraid!
A Jew will fare well in the world if only he can play music,
You will have the same violin
And you will play for your children"

The sounds of an old song
Will follow you in the world
You will take the violin
And sing what your grandfather sang

Whether Rothschild or I
Each Jew has tears in his eyes,
When they listen to that old song.

J. Tuwim, *Stara piosenka (Miasteczko Będzin)*¹⁹

But such fragments are just side notes, just like the nonsensical mockery of anti-Jewish slander in the work of Tuwim. It was better to believe in the future and the possibility of some reform of the world. And so Tuwim, "an imitator of the voices of the world", "a prestidigitator", "alert and listening [...] catcher of dreams" dreamt,

¹⁹ J. Tuwim, *Stara piosenka (Miasteczko Będzin)*, in: *Żydzi polscy według Tuwima*, Centrum Dialogu im. Marka Edelmana, Łódź, 2013, pp. 31–33.

like Korczak, “the bold plan to rebuild the world”. He, however, operated in a domain closer to him: as the new Alchemist of words he dreamt that a new poetic language could become a common home and a homeland of all readers. Let’s not forget about his continuous promotion of Esperanto and about how often he acrobatically used multilingualism, quotes and phraseology from many European languages.

Ludwik Zamenhof himself believed that “The Jew, of all men, feels the greatest sorrow stemming from divisions between people”. We can quote him saying in 1905:

If I weren’t a Jew from a ghetto, the idea of unifying mankind would either never have occurred to me or wouldn’t have had such a hold on me throughout my life.²⁰

Also George Steiner recollects, that:

Artificial languages proposed since J.M. Schleyer’s *volapik* (1879) and Esperanto by Ludwik Zamenhof (1887) had the form of auxiliary *interlinguae* shaped in such a way to [...] counter the threat of chauvinism and isolationism in a world marked by rising nationalism.²¹

In its long history the Jewish nation survived because people were faithful to its Book, but Jews absorbed all the linguistic elements they encountered. Several generations after “leaving the ghetto” many outstanding XX century cultural personas with Jewish origin; linguists, journalists, poets, narrators and philosophers, will try to imbue language with almost religious significance. They will try to achieve it by taking great care of its correctness or, conversely, by deforming and destroying it. Tuwim was one of them. He wrote about Esperanto

The structure of that language is, in my opinion, brilliant, my admiration for its character has not weakened, and my passion was so ardent and sincere that in the matter of international languages, especially Esperanto, I will write one day a special article.²²

It is a great shame that he did not get to write the article. I think that all of his poetry – and not just the bold experiments: *Słowieńnie* or *Atuli mirohlady* – aimed at creating a free space, something like a poetic, universal *interlingua*...

²⁰ L. Zamenhof in a letter written in 1905, in: A. Korzhenkov, *The Life of Zamenhof*, translated by I.M. Richmond, H. Tonkin (ed.), Mondial & Universal Esperanto Association, New York 2010, p. 5.

²¹ G. Steiner, *Po wieży Babel. Problemy języka i przekładu*, translated by O. and W. Kubiński, Universitas, Cracow 2000, p. 285.

²² J. Tuwim, *Tam zostałem. Wspomnienia młodości*, Czytelnik, Warsaw 2003, p. 56 (first printing: “Wiadomości Literackie” 1934, issue 33, p. 11).

Speaking about the condition of an assimilated Jew without speaking about Jews...

By quoting Korczak's novel about "being chequered", I wanted to underline a certain metaphor pertaining to ethnic distinction. I think that many writers of Jewish descent who wrote in Polish applied a similar tactic, especially during the interwar period. Their writing would often contain allusions to a feeling of being discriminated against, and hidden postulates of universalism in the hope that a part of their audience will be able to decipher them. I think that several of Tuwim's poems can be interpreted in this way, and that the masked self – fashioning, the pain of the "wedge digging into his outlook" as well as his "personal, deepest experiences" can be felt in his poetry.

I'd like to note the poem *Dogs*, published in 1928 on the first page of "Literary News" and repeatedly attacked for blasphemy during the interwar period. I will quote several stanzas:

Growling, long I tramped about with dog-like gait,
Puffed up, sulky and ill,
Till I walked out the door, Barked in distress, and to relate
My dogs barked back at me still,

[...]
'Tis just a man who cries for help,
A man staring into a horrible wonder.

[...]

And so we will sleep, exhausted with weeping,
Maybe in a dream we will have easier breath,
When we see in our wretched dog dreams, sleeping,
The grey phantom of our canine death.

There a flat, lowland paradise appears,
As we sniff around God's door,
And, as once to the distressed and the paupers,
To the dogs the saving god will come, and lift them from the floor.

J. Tuwim, *Dogs*²³

²³ J. Tuwim, *Psy*, in: *Dzieła*, vol. I: *Wiersze*, vol. 2, pp. 42–43; [*Rzecz czarnolesska*, first printing: "Wiadomości Literackie" 1928, issue 41, p. 1].

This poem is often interpreted as a sign of solidarity with the animal world. It can be read very differently, however, if one recalls a different “horrible wonder”, more precisely the “dog metamorphosis” from Heinrich Heine’s beautiful *Hebrew Melodies*, Princess Sabbath. *Hebrew Melodies* speaks of the mythical fate of a “cursed prince”, who “by the word of evil magic” is turned into a dog. Every “Friday evening”, he regains his original form and returns to the wise and most beautiful princess Sabbath, but he soon has to change into “a scarecrow” and return to “the dump of life”. Quoting from Maria Konopnicka’s beautiful translation:

A dog, with canine thoughts on his mind,
he rolls around in the mud and the dump of life
to the sound of students’ ridiculing whistles.

But every Friday’s evening,
At twilight’s mysterious moment,

The spell is broken suddenly and that dog
Becomes a human being.

And human, with a human soul,
With his heart lifted, his head high
Clean and dressed in festive clothes
He walks into his father’s court

H. Heine, *Princess Sabbath*²⁴

In a joking fashion, Heine describes a dramatic dissonance, to which Artur Sandauer and Aleksander Hertz also pointed, the dissonance between the Jews’ vision of a “holy nation”, and Lucifer’s vision of a cursed nation, between “pride” and “shame”, between the frame of mind of a Jew, a “chosen one” and a “member of a charismatic team”, and the imposed role of a pariah and pest.²⁵

²⁴ H. Heine, *Księżna Sabbath*, translated by M. Konopnicka, http://wiersze.wikia.com/wiki/Księżna_Sabbath [accessed: 15.02.2014].

²⁵ A. Hertz, *op. cit.*, pp. 123–124; A. Sandauer, *op. cit.*, p. 5. For more information about anti-Semitic attacks on Tuwim and his ambivalent attitude towards Jewishness see A. Polonsky, “Why did they hate the Tuwim Boy so much?”. *Jews and “Artificial Jews” in the Literary Polemics in the Second Polish Republic*, in: *Antisemitism and its Opponents in Modern Poland*, R. Blobaum (ed.), Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London 2005, pp. 189–209; P. Matywiecki, *Twarz Tuwima*, pp. 254–330; J.B. Michlic, *Culture of EthnoNationalism and the Identity of Jews in Inter-War Poland*, in: *Insiders and Outsiders. Dilemmas of East European Jewry*, R.I. Cohen, J. Frankel, S.Hoffman (eds.), Littman Library Of Jewish Civilization, Oxford-Portland 2010, pp. 131–147; *Julian Tuwim. Dyskusja z udziałem Aliny Molisak, Belli Szwarzman-Czarnoty, Michała Głowińskiego i Piotra Matywieckiego*, “Midrasz” 2013, issue 5, pp. 12–20.

Tuwim valued Heine from the dawn of his writing, they had similar, dramatic experiences beginning with the shock of living through a pogrom in their childhood. Tuwim was repeatedly compared to Heine and owed him much; he referenced Heine in his satire of Wasilewski and Pieńkowski²⁶, but he never quoted the humorous yet sad *Hebrew Melodies* translated into Polish by Maria Konopnicka. "The sound of students' ridiculing whistles", unfortunately still common in twentieth century Europe, made it clear that one cannot openly complain... Tuwim himself tells us so... Here are the following, shocking stanzas from the poem *Dogs*:

On all fours at the doorstep of a home
 To the stars I wail, just like you, just as you do,
 That there is no one to explain to, to let know,
 That we suffer, night people and dogs – down and blue.

We do not howl from the cold, not from hunger,
 But that the moon has fallen on us, a lifeless sheet

And from despair over this garden's silver depth down under,
 For this intangible silence, for this world we meet

²⁶ See the poem *Z Heinego (From Heine)* (first printing: "Wiadomości Literackie" 1934, issue 42, p. 6):

Wasilewski und Pieńkowski
 Polen aus der Endekei
 Curse me for my Jewish kin,
 Wishing strongly I'd die,
 For like once dieser Heinrich
 I write poems ganz Gut
 And for they're very peinlich
 That in Polish schreibt der Jud
 Und mit einem Hitler-Hering
 Drinking vodka, making love
 "Wish I were a Goering"
 Whispered lieber Stanislaw.
 Und der Sigismund der alte,
 By that thought at once undulled,
 Whispered "Lieber Arjat! Warte!
 Wird schon kommen. Nur Geduld!
 Poems werben nur wir schreiben:
 Ich und du und Nowaczyński
 Der Kozicki, der Rybarski
 Und der grosse Rmbieliński.
 J. Tuwim, *Z Heinego*

Oh, to whom, in this longing, to whom
 Do we lift our frightened heads?
 Neither can you answer, lousy dogs, ungroomed
 Nor, dog brothers, can I answer that!

J. Tuwim, *Dogs*²⁷

I do not think that it is true that Tuwim did not want to take an interest in Jewish culture. He also voiced a feeling of solidarity with Jews who were suffering elsewhere. As an example, let us consider the poem *Kike*. Here appears a positive character taken straight from Jewish folklore and Yiddish literature: the title's young meshugenah (we will not meet this friendly depiction of a gaberdine – clad Jew until *Kwiaty Polskie*). The title itself, in my opinion, refers more to the cute Jewish word “Yidl” than to the derogatory Polish diminution. It is worth noting that only in the last stanza does the poet speak of Jews in the first person plural form (besides the enigmatic poem *Dogs*, this form will not appear until the war, in the dramatic manifest *We, Polish Jews*). It goes like this:

And we'll go then, each of us his own way
 To wander, glum and unbalanced, every single day.
 There's no quiet haven, this will not be changed,
 For us, singing Jews, for us, Jews deranged.

J. Tuwim, *Kike*²⁸

There is a possibility that this is a polemical echo of the symbolic dancing and singing of the Hasidic Jews from the first act of Izaak Leib Peretz's masterpiece *The Golden Chain* (*Di goldene kejt*, 1909). According to Chone Shmeruk, starting with its original version (entitled *Fall of the Tzadik Court*), Peretz constantly worked on his poem: he wanted it to show the metaphorical demise of three main nineteenth century Eastern Europe trends: Hasidic Jews, the Misnagdim, and followers of the Haskalah Maskilim. In the final version, entitled *The Golden Chain*, he created a mystical character – the old and wise Tzadik Rebbe Shloyme, who is attempting to cancel time. The fall of the Hasidic house was contrasted with the new cultural trend of the younger generation (personified by the tzadik's great grandson), a trend bound to the past by a golden chain, because it profited from the old Hasidic poetic tradition.²⁹

²⁷ J. Tuwim, *Psy*, p. 42–43 [emphasis added G.T.].

²⁸ Idem, *Żydek*, in: *Dziela*, vol. I: *Wiersze*, vol. 1, p. 282. [*Słowa we krwi*, first printing: “Skamander” 1925, issue 4, p. 235].

²⁹ See Ch. Shmeruk, *Przegląd literatury w języku jidysz do I wojny światowej*, in: *Teatr żydowski w Polsce. Materiały z międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej, Warsaw, 18–21 October 1993*, A. Kuligowska-Korzeniewska, M. Leyko (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź

Let us not forget that in an interview Tuwim stated that he "knows and values" the "old gaberline – clad Jew" type, "untouched by European culture" and presenting "certain original values".³⁰ In the first act of *The Golden Chain*, it is the old tzadik, Rebbe Shloyme, who encourages dancing and singing in unison:

Like this! And so we walk, singing, dancing... We, the great, great Jews, [...] and we do not ask, we do not beg, we the Jews, the proud Jews, from the lineage of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob³¹.

Among Jews, Peretz was the subject of true worship. The Poles also valued him as an author who remained much under the influence of Wyspiański: his plays were performed a whole or in fragments in Lodz, Warsaw, and other Polish cities³². The words of Rabbi Shloyme from *The Golden Chain* were engraved on his tombstone in a mausoleum, where Szymon Anski and Jakub Dinezon also rest in peace, at the cemetery on Okopowa street in Warsaw. Let us remember that in 1928 Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński reviewed Peretz's *Night in the Old Marketplace* (1907) enthusiastically:

Someone once rightfully said that travels educate. Yesterday evening I returned from such a travel: I rode over to Karowa street to see the Jewish Theatre in Poland and I did not regret it. [...] And one thing hit me. Is it sensible to live so near to one

1998, p. 49: "In the first act of the last version, Peretz created the impressive character of a spiritual, old tzadik and instead of the previously mentioned ruins of a manor, he shows how his great-grandson inherits an Hasidic manor and pursues the Hasidic poetic traditions". In the initial version, printed in Hebrew in 1903, the dramatic work was entitled the Fall of the House of the tzadik: "Peretz wasn't happy with the first version of the play, in which only the titular fall of Hasidism corresponded with the author's vision. [...] In 1906 he made a translation into Yiddish [...] with the final form of the work the author had problems until his death" (ibidem). It was the only work of Peretz staged in his lifetime, but only a premiere took place: "the main reason for cancelling the remaining shows were the threats of Warsaw's Hasidic Jews, for whom the showing of the character of tzadik was a profanation of the memory of the strongly revered tzadik of Kock" (ibidem).

³⁰ *Wywiady z pisarzami polskimi pochodzenia żydowskiego, Rozmowa z Julianem Tuwimem*, in: *Rozmowy z Tuwimem*, p. 25 (first printing: "Dziennik Warszawski" 1927, issue 34 [6-7.02.1927]).

³¹ My translation – G. Tyivo transcription: "Un azoy! azoy geyn mir, zingendig un tantsendik... mir groyse groyse yidn [...] un mir beten nisht, un mir betlen nisht groyse shtoltse yidn zenen mir, zera avrohom, yitskhok ve jankev". in: I. Peretz, *Di goldene keyt*, Vilnius 1922, p. 34. Peretz was read in Korczak's Orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto during a lecture on him – see M. Zylberberg, *Na chłodnej 33*, in: *Wspomnienia o Januszu Korczaku*, compilation by L. Barszczewska, B. Milewicz, Nasza Księgarnia, Warsaw 1981, pp. 266–267.

³² For more on stagings of Peretz's plays see R. Węgrzyniak, *Hebrajskie studio dramatyczne w Łodzi* and M. Bulat, *Źródła do badania dziejów scen żydowskich w Łodzi*, in: *Łódzkie sceny żydowskie*, M. Leyko (ed.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łodz 2000, pp. 75 and 194.

another, yet know so little of each other, to completely not know one another? We have plays from all over the world acted out on our stages, often trivial and flimsy, yet we do absolutely nothing to get to know the soul of the nation with which we have come to inhabit this land.³³

In an interview given to “Literarische Bleter” in 1926 in order to “once and for all end the opinions about [his] negative attitudes towards Yiddish literature”, Tuwim named Peretz as an author he knew from translations (besides Sholem Aleichem, Shalom Asch, Joseph Opatoshu). He even mentioned the idea of publishing an anthology of “new Jewish poetry”.³⁴ Therefore, the idea that *The Golden Chain* was known, or at least partially known to Tuwim is not out of the question, especially since when someone read Yiddish writing to him aloud, he was able to “figure things out based on his knowledge of the German language”.³⁵ Of course the poet, who did not acknowledge the old Hasidic traditions, could not agree with the vision of Jewish pride presented by Peretz. By keeping the pronoun “we”, he remade the combined Hasidic dance into a lonely dance of two Jews, eternal wanderers, but very different from each other: an assimilated poet, and a tiny orthodox lunatic. If they symbolised two different factions of twentieth century Polish Jews, we have here a sort of ciphered dialogue with a recently deceased father of modern day Yiddish literature...

Botanical Ethnography: Tuwim’s “book of flowers”

The Jewish cause is viewed in this sense in *Polish Flowers* – written during and after the Second World War. One of the main themes of the poem is national prejudice and racial misunderstandings. Ignacy Dziewierski is prejudiced towards the Russians, his granddaughter on the other hand is prejudiced toward Bolshevik Jews. Wicek Jałowiecki is prejudiced toward Jewish-Bolshevik art, young Kazik hates a Russian officer’s daughter – a woman he does not even know. The epilogue confirms the senselessness of such an attitude, which contributes to the murder of the innocent Aniela. It is satire aimed at the obsession over racial purity, as shown by the last name of a Semitic aristocrat: Folblut. The Lodz-based poet dreamed of tolerance and of a peaceful coexistence of different nations, traditions and beliefs, right at the moment when it turned out to be impossible. In *Polish Flowers (Kwiaty Polskie)* he does not give up on these dreams by showing

³³ T. [Boy] Żeleński, *Pisma*, series 4, vol. 22: *Flirt z Melpomeną*, PIW, Warsaw 1964, p. 518–520 (first printing: “Kurier Poranny” 1928, issue 296 [24.10.1928]; “Nowy Dziennik” 1928, issue 287).

³⁴ K. Szymaniak, *op. cit.*

³⁵ *Ibidem*. See also *Wywiady z pisarzami polskimi...*, p. 26.

how tolerance is instilled in Christian tradition and the culture of the old First Polish Commonwealth.

He relies on unshakeable and common authorities. In *A Prayer (Modlitwa)*, he writes: "There is neither Greek nor Jew", he reaches for the *Letter to the Galatians* 3, 28, St. Paul's "converts" as translated by fr. Jakub Wujek, SI. This paragraph, and the next, is worth quoting:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, no slave and no free man, no man and no woman; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ. **And if you are of Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs as it is promised.**³⁶

Many Poles of Tuwim's time preferred to forget about the universalist meaning of the gospel ("perfect Catholics, just not Christians yet" – is how they are described in the poem), just as they preferred not knowing that they are "the seed of Abraham". It was much easier to reach for stereotypes:

Onions are a favourite of the Jew.
Me, a catholic, cabbage is what I'll bite into.
(One thing's a flaw, I've one complaint:
That their beliefs are empty of saints.)
J. Tuwim, *Polish Flowers*

The poet encourages:

May you, dear human, Tatar, Greek
Be it a black man – it matters not
Be human. Have no gain
From your brother's harm. Be human.
J. Tuwim, *Polish Flowers*³⁷

Another work referenced in *Polish Flowers* is *Pan Tadeusz*, deeply rooted in tradition. The reference is misunderstood, it was intended to send a message of reconciliation and peace-making. It was by comparing him to Jankiel, a character from the epic poem, that Nowaczyński mocked Tuwim patronizingly.³⁸ Instead of

³⁶ *The letter from Paul the Apostle to the Galatians*, in: *Bible, i.e. the Old and New Testament*, translated by J. Wujek, as cited in the edition: *Brytyjskie i Zagraniczne Towarzystwo Biblijne*, Warsaw 1923; as cited in: http://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/Biblia_Wujka/List_do_Galatów_3 [accessed on: 15.02.2014] (emphasis added – G.T.).

³⁷ J. Tuwim, *Dziela*, vol. II: *Kwiaty polskie*, Warsaw, 1955, p. 260 (III, VIII).

³⁸ Allegedly, Nowaczyński raised such a toast to Tuwim: "There is no Polish literature without Mickiewicz, there is no Mickiewicz without Pan Tadeusz, there is no Pan Tadeusz without Jankiel,

a gentry-owned farm, we have an orchard (“Sullen, sparse and lank, / with a poor Jewish orchard keeper”), and in place of Jankiel’s inn (in Mickiewicz’s work similar “to a Jew, who sways during prayer”) there is a poor, Jewish household.

In it, a black gaberdine shopkeeper
 With a gaze intent and serious
 Studied old pants in the light
 And he lifted them before his eyes
 And held them stretched between his hands
 As a cantor does, when during ceremony
 He lifts the Torah above the altar

J. Tuwim, *Kwiaty polskie*³⁹

Starting in the thirties, Tuwim stopped “poking needles” into the gaberdine-clad Jew, pointing his weapon at the “converts”.⁴⁰ In *Polish Flowers*, he looks at the lumpenproletariat of Lodz with a spiritual eye, Chagall-like even, entirely different than before. He recalls a widow with many children who spasmodically tries to save her seven children from disease and pogroms. He also recreates the shoemaker/orchard keeper, who “And so-so during the summer / with patches he patched his misery. / Slouched with his head bowed [...]”.⁴¹ This vision, although naturalistic at first glance, gains a metaphysical dimension, evoking (even rhythmically so) Leśmian-style characters: A limping shoemaker, sewing “Shoes in God’s size”⁴² and a hunchback who “In good weather and Indian summer. / [...] / His death too is indeed hunched”.⁴³

Tuwim makes a stand against racism and intolerance with ecumenism and a metaphorical vision of “Polish flowers”. It is no coincidence that several characters of the poem have a botanical nickname. I would call this “botanical ethnography”, this recreation of the Second Commonwealth’s ethnic plethora. The poet puts together a perfect, syncretic bouquet of three nations, who in reality could not peacefully coexist with each other; he felt an attachment to them regardless of this (the first title of the poem bears the name “Bouquet”). It is no surprise to us then, that such a “rustic Bouquet, if pretty”, can even appeal to an Apollin. I believe my hypothesis is confirmed by a repeated reference to the Song of

long live Tuwim!” (M. Urbanek, *Tuwim, wylękniony bluźnierca*, Wydawnictwo Iskry, Warsaw 2013, p. 126).

³⁹ J. Tuwim, *Dziela*, vol. II: *Kwiaty polskie*, p. 247 (III, V).

⁴⁰ Idem, *Rym*, in: *Utworky nieznanne*, p. 100.

⁴¹ Idem, *Dziela*, vol. II: *Kwiaty polskie*, p. 39 (I, IV) and 248 (III, V).

⁴² B. Leśmian, *Szewczyk*, in: *Poezje wybrane*, compilation by J. Trznadel, edition III, extended., Wrocław 1991, p. 100.

⁴³ Idem, *Garbus*, in: *Poezje wybrane*, p. 101.

Songs. Let us be reminded that the self-schooled artist Dzewierski rewrites it calligraphically, that his granddaughter Aniela recites it in church as the anti-song at the sermon of a nationalist priest, triggering a scandal, and that it reverberates in the description of the Jewish orchardist and his family. The book is a part of both the Hebrew and the Christian Bible canon, in it you can find the motif of a garden-world, present in Tuwim's poem (the gardener Dzewierski. The Jewish orchardist, etc.). It symbolises unity and reunion, because the love of the groom and the bride was interpreted as an allegory of the relationship of God and Israel (in the Jewish tradition) of the Church with Christ (among Christians). We should remember that in the anti-Semitic witch-hunt for Tuwim and in the discussions it caused there were many allusions to the Song of Songs. I quote from the pamphlet *Asy z czystej rasy* (Aces of pure races) by Samuel Jacob Imber, Tuwim's defender against Rostworowski

Mr R[ostworowski]'s "honesty" in rehabilitating the Song of Songs can be attested by the fact that he cannot resist casually remarking that the element of nature in the Song of Songs is rather "an orchard-commodity element". And so a *numerus clausus* is introduced also into nature. **The vegetable garden** – is the Aryan-Christian "nature", **the orchard**, then, is a secondary-nature, of a lesser quality, because the orchard brings to mind a Jewish tenant. ... [...] It will be necessary to extend the natural *numerus clausus*, dear count!⁴⁴

Tuwim tried to counter that madness with his Heine-like humour.

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⁴⁴ S.J. Imber, *Rekapitulacja, czy kapitulacja?*, p. 58 (emphasis added by the author).

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Giovanna Tomassucci

Tuwim's Wedge: "Survival Strategies" of a Polish-Jewish Poet

(Summary)

Tuwim's approach to the "Jewish question" has already been analyzed by Polish and foreign scholars. The article is intended to consider some "survival strategies" of the Polish poet from a slightly different angle. In Poland, in the period between the wars Jewish writers were persuaded to accept total polonization and a rejection of their ethnic identity; yet, at the same time they often suffered a rejection from the circles of Polish artists. Any attempt of highlighting their Jewish identity or even a slight interest in Jewish culture incited brutal Jew-bashings.

Tuwim considered his being a Polish Jew not only as a fact to be proud of, but also as an opportunity for engaging with self-criticism. He painfully felt the Jewish question as "a powerful wedge cleaving [his own] worldview". However, like many other Polish-Jewish writers he masked its enduring presence in his own psyche, constructing his public persona through a process of self-fashioning.

This paper tries to follow the traces of this "wedge" in Tuwim's works: from poems supposedly having nothing to do with the "Jewish question", to encrypted allusions to the great Yiddish writers, from his relentless questioning of all forms of intolerance and nationalist rhetoric, to his conviction that a new poetic language could "reform the world" and become a homeland for all readers regardless of their nationality.

Keywords: Julian Tuwim, Jewish identity, Polish-Jewish poet, polonisation, assimilation, antisemitism, self-fashioning