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In the Interstices of Languages and Cultures. Julian Strykowski – a Polish Writer of Jewish Origin

[...] Hebrew and Yiddish writer [...] lived in the interstices of several languages and cultures [...]

B. Harshav (1990)

Abstract

The following sketch is a depiction of a prewar stage of life as well as work of Julian Strykowski who was a Polish writer of Jewish origin. Identity quandary of the author of *Voices in the Dark* was presented against the background of changes taking place in the Jewish world at the turn of the twentieth century juxtaposed with the parallel choices of Shmuel Josef Agnon and Isaac Bashevis Singer. The aim of the essay is to present the role of the language of writing in the process of shaping authors' personal identity.

Keywords: Julian Strykowski; Jewish literature; Polish literature; Jewish identity; Polish Jews

In the 1980s Artur Sandauer, once again coping with the problem of Jewish identity, wrote a little book entitled *On the Situation of the Polish Writer of Jewish Origin Between the Wars*¹. In the book he made

¹ An English translation of some of this text is to be found in: *Poland Between the Wars. 1918-*

reference to the artistic works of Tuwim, Słonimski, Schulz, Ważyk, Rudnicki, Leśmian, Strykowski and... his own. The authors, in accordance with the title's definition, are "Polish writers", all having been assimilated to varying degrees; indeed, according to Sandauer, even Leśmian's subconsciousness was Polish. Nevertheless, alongside, for instance, Wojdowski, the Brandys brothers and Benski, they comprised a small group amongst the multitude of authors "of Jewish origin" coming from the areas of pre-partition Poland, who became either Hebrew, Yiddish or Polish writers, or, from another ("domestic, national") perspective, Israeli, American, English or German ones.

In order to depict the full range of the phenomenon, some of these writers should be mentioned. Our description is concerned only with prose fiction writers, with no attention paid to the completeness of the enumeration, the geographical order, social status or religious family traditions (Talmudic, Hasidic, or "enlightened"), the later language of writing, or the country of residence. At the head of this "array," there obviously stands "the classic author of Yiddish literature" Icchok Leib Perec (born in Zamość in 1852), followed by David Frishman (Zgierz, 1865), Micha Josef Berditchewsky (Medzhybizh [Międzybórz], 1865), Mordecai Zev Feierberg (Novograd Volynsk [Nowogród Wołyński], 1874), Hirsh David Nomberg (Mszczonów, 1876), Shalom Ash (Kutno, 1880), Gershon Shofman (Orsha [Orsza], 1880), Isaac Maier Weisenberg (Żelechów, 1881), Aharon Abraham Kabak, Smorgon near Vilnius), Isaac Dov Berkowitz (Slutsk [Słuck], 1885), Josef Opatoshu (Mława, 1886), Zalman Shneur (Shklov [Szklów], 1886), Devorah Baron (Uzda near Minsk, 1887), Shmuel Josef Agnon (Buchach [Buczacz], 1888), Asher Barash (Lopatyn near Brody, 1889), Hinde Esther Kreitman née Singer (Biłgoraj, 1891), Bruno Schulz (Drohobych, 1892), Jisrael Joshua Singer (Biłgoraj, 1893), Isaac Bashevis Singer (Leoncin near Warsaw, 1902), Debora Vogel (Burshtyn, 1902), Julian Strykowski (Stryj, 1905), Josef Aricha (Olevsk, 1907), Stanisław Wygodzki (Bedzin, 1907), Adolf Rudnicki (Żabno near Tarnów, 1909), Chaim Grade (Vilna, 1910), Artur Sandauer (Sambor, 1913), Jakub Glatstein (Lublin, 1914)...

Only one writer from this galaxy of authors is the subject of this article, namely Julian Strykowski. However, in order to fully understand the dynamics of transformation, and the peculiarity and diversity of the metamorphosis which was well under way at that time, and in order to sense the impetus of social changes which Benjamin Harshav named the modern Jewish revolution (Harshav 1990: 316), a much wider, transgenerational presentation should be made. Only the creation of at least a four-generation

biographical lexicon, along with an atlas of places registering the migration of young authors from their *shtetls* to Polish cities and the capitals of the world, would give us an idea of the intellectual unrest and mobility of this nation on the move (Harshav 2003). The revolution, Harshav wrote, was:

a centrifugal movement catapulting Jews in all directions: Zionism, Communism, Yiddish culture, Hebrew culture, assimilation and so on. Vis-a-vis his father or grandfather, a totally assimilated Jew embodied a revolution that was not less radical than the Zionist utopia.

This rebellion

rejected the modes of existence and behaviour of the small town Jews and embraced the values and systems of European secular culture. [...] which brought about a total transformation of the Jews, their languages, conceptual worlds, professions, education, national institutions, and place in geography and in general history (ibidem: 309, 300).

The authors mentioned above contributed to the revolution in great measure, but in order for them to become known in the world of literature, thorough social transformations within the bounds of Talmudic Judaism were needed. They, above all, were caused in the first place by the spread of Hasidism and then *Haskalah*.

Nevertheless, literary historians (Alter 1994:42; Shaked 2008:1) unanimously claim that Post-Enlightenment secular Jewish culture became crystallised after a series of pogroms in Russia in 1881 which contributed to the definitive collapse of the assimilative movement of *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment of the years 1780-1880) ; that is, attempts to reform and improve the living standards of Jewish society in Europe at the cost of adopting European norms and standards whilst simultaneously remaining faithful to the religion of their ancestors.

In different parts of pre-partition Poland, emancipation changes were taking place at a different pace. They were truly revolutionary in nature, “violent as a storm” in Congress Poland. Isaac Bashevis presented it in his memoir essay in the following way:

Zionist and revolutionary movements led to far-reaching changes in Russian and Lithuanian *shtetls*. [...] However, for the Polish Hasidic world these matters seemed remote. Here, in a closed circle, several dozen or even a hundred *tzaddics* exercised their authority. [...]

Suddenly, the war broke out and everything turned upside down. Jews in Poland, during some two or three years, underwent the process which in Russia and Lithuania took several decades. Young men, who only yesterday wore side locks and swayed upon Talmud, unexpectedly transformed into

communists. Hasidic chambers of prayer and *batei midrash* emptied within one night (Singer 1993: 42-43).

In Galicia, which after the first partition belonged to the Habsburg Empire, the process took a different, more peaceful form. Galician Jews, though impoverished, gained a sense of stability and relative safety, particularly in the second part of the nineteenth century. Hillel Halkin wrote:

Beginning with the accession of Franz Josef in 1848, [...], conditions improved steadily, especially after 1868, when the last anti-Jewish legislation was repealed and a series of sweeping constitutional reforms was instituted in the empire as a whole. From now on Jews paid no special taxes, could live and travel where they pleased, were free to engage in any business or profession, had the right to educate their children in their own schools, and could even vote and stand for office in local and municipal elections. Above all, they could live without fear of violence and persecution, feeling safe in the confidence that they were protected from hostile or arbitrary forces by a powerful, enlightened, and law-abiding regime (Halkin 1985: 235).

II

If the twentieth century started for good with the revolution of 1905, the hero of this article was born at the very beginning of the century in Stryj, Galicia. He lived almost to the end of it. He died at the age of 91 in Warsaw, leaving behind stories about the fate of the Galician Jews. Alongside Agnon (also from Galicia, from Podole), Bashevis Singer (from Congress Poland), Kanowicz (from Lithuania), he was one of the most outstanding prose fiction writers portraying the world of “Polish” *shtetls*.

He made his debut very late, after World War II. In the 1950s he published two socially significant and disparate novels: a poor one, entitled *Run to Fragalà*, the story of famine and love and about a way to Communism, and the excellent *Voices in the Dark*, a bitter and nostalgic story which revives the world of the Galician *shtetl* at the beginning of the 20th century (Stryj near Lvov served as a prototype), with all its dirt and yearnings. In the following decade Strykowski produced extraordinary existential short stories on loneliness and the death of emotions, collected in one volume with the characteristic title of *One's Own Name*, as well as an apocalyptic novel in the form of a classical ancient drama, called *The Inn* (later adapted for the screen by Jerzy Kawalerowicz). Written in the 1970s, *Azril's Dream* was perhaps the best novel in the author's oeuvre, but of equal importance was the slightly western-like and solemn *Stranger from Narbonne*, depicting the contemporary problem of the reckless struggle for the dignity of the nation under the historical disguise of the fight with

the Inquisition. A number of various publications appeared during the following decade, amongst which the most interesting is the formally and stylistically sophisticated story about a great artist and his lack of fulfilment in life and art, namely *Tommaso del Cavaliere*. The years after the period of martial law was the time of his Biblical triptych, a not entirely successful cycle referring to Biblical stories about hero-saviours, namely Moses, David and Judah Maccabee. It should be acknowledged that the 1980s begin and end with the theme of settling accounts. Two books imbued with the struggle against Communist blindness are *Great Fear* (1980) and *The Same but Differently* (1990). Before his death, the author managed to publish two major stories, namely the cabalistic-Hasidic morality play entitled *The Doe, or Conversation between a Boy, an Angel, and Lucifer*, and the bold, but at the same time subtle, homoerotic *Silence*. The author did not manage to write his dream novel about Spinoza, a heretic anathemised by the Jewish community of Amsterdam.

The following outline gives a portrayal of the pre-war life of the intellectual of Jewish descent from Galicia whose literary work, though subjectively selected, has just been briefly outlined above.

Stryj – Lvov – Warsaw

The actual name of the future writer Julian Strykowski was Pesach Jakub Stark. He came from an orthodox, conservative home with Hasidic traditions. His father, Tzvi Hersh Rosenman (1857-1928), was a melamed, a Talmud teacher. Although in *Sefer Stryj* (the Memorial Book of Stryj) no information about him was retained, in his son's eyes he remained an eminent scholar. When young, Tzvi Hersh was on the way to being emancipated, but – as his brother recalled – he turned back to orthodoxy. Strykowski's mother, Hanah Stark, was descended from peasant stock. It was she who, like the majority of Jewish women in those times, with a great effort supported her family by selling textile materials at the market. After her husband's death, she went to Palestine to her elder son. There she died in 1944. Pesach was the youngest of the three children who lived. He received the name Stark after his mother who was the ritual wife, according to official documents, of Hersh Rosenman. His parents entered into a religious marriage and not a civil one, and that is why their child was registered as extramarital (bearing his mother's surname). This also gave rise to the boy's later troubles, and the insinuating remarks of his peers in his Polish school. This Polish school turns out to be a slightly surprising element in his biography. After a short period attending a *cheder*, which was also his father's *cheder*, his father, despotic and strict about religion, allowed his younger son (as well as his daughter

who was born in 1889) to receive a secular education. Pesach's elder brother, Mordechai, born in 1901, who eagerly learned the Talmud, did not seize this opportunity. He became halutz, reached Palestine together with the third wave of emigrants, and settled in a kibbutz.

In Stryj in the 1910s there was a scout organization called Hashomer Hatzair which Pesach joined, and this is where he became influenced by Zionist ideas and learned contemporary Hebrew. Characteristic of that early period was his oscillation between the Polish language (symbolized by Maria, his beloved sister who worked as a gymnasium (secondary school) teacher in Stanisławów) and Hebrew (represented by poets such as Bialik and Tchernichovsky), whilst at the same time strongly rejecting Yiddish. During the great language war (see Halkin 2002) Pesach Stark stood on the side of the Hebrew language and against Yiddish which reminded him of the world of the ghetto (associated with darkness, backwardness and filth), which he wished to escape. As Harshav observes, "The modern Jewish revolution was prompted not by the *shtetl* culture, but by those who revolted against it" (Harshav 2003: 317). Why did the Polish language eventually win out, causing such works as *Azril's Dream* or *The Doe* to be written? The editors of the newly established literary magazine "Moznaim" did not answer his letter sent to Palestine, which contained an early short story in Hebrew. Nevertheless, the choice of the Polish language as a literary medium gave him the possibility of flirting with Communism...

Having graduated from the Classical Gymnasium in Stryj, the 21-year-old came to Lvov to study Polish literature. He wanted to be a writer. He knew Greek, Latin, and also Hebrew, French, German, Russian, and obviously Yiddish and Polish. During the years 1928-1932 his translations from Hebrew, French and Russian were published in the Lvov Jewish daily "Chwila" ("Moment").

In his university days (1926/1927 – 1931/1932), as a novice translator and poet, he got in touch with poets from the Zionist circle of "Chwila". He later recalled that he made friends with Maurycy Szymel, and that he was acquainted with Daniel Ihr, Stefan Pomer and Karol Dresdner, and thus he socialised with young Jewish people engaged in activities connected with national tradition. At the same time, he made attempts to come closer to left-leaning artists centred around the poet and feature writer Stanisław Salzman and Jan Śpiewak, who, together with Stanisław Jerzy Lec, Edward Brecher and Józef Streicher, formed something like a Lvov literary avant-garde group; they also kept in touch with Alexander Dan, the publisher of communising magazines in Lvov, such as "Nowa Kronika" and "Tryby".

In 1930 Stark cancelled his membership of the Jewish Students' Society at Lvov University (Sprawozdanie 1931), a grouping with a nationalistic,

Zionist orientation. This was connected with his participation in the activities of the student organization “Life”, run by Stanisław Jerzy Lec and Leon Pasternak. “Life” was neophyte in nature with regard to Communist ideas. Years later, Strykowski remembered that he had been deceived by appearances, because in the Jewish Academic House, where the Zionists dominated, the activists of “Life” appeared uncompromising and brave.

After gaining his PhD and working for a year in the gymnasium in Płock, he returned to Stryj where, after some time trying, he became affiliated with the Communist Party of Western Ukraine (Komunistyczna Partia Zachodniej Ukrainy, KPZU) and engaged in activities on behalf of the party in Agroid, the Association for the Development of the Agricultural Work and Outwork Industry amongst Jews in Poland. At first, Agroid was a legal social organization. Later, when it became affiliated with the Communist Party in order to spread political propaganda, it was banned by the authorities (Piekarski 2007).

Stark was put in jail in 1935. After being released from prison he went to Warsaw. Apart from constant fears of being re-arrested, and the lack of professional prospects in Lvov, there arose around the young activist sexual innuendo and the suspicion of him being homosexual. He felt isolated, rejected and under threat. As a matter of fact, the Communist Party of Poland was soon dissolved by a decision of the Komintern. Drifting away from Communist ideology, Stark returned to translating from Hebrew and French. He also published his first novelettes for teenagers in Polish under the pen name Łukasz Monastyrski. He concealed his Jewish identity in those autobiographical childhood stories. And this is perhaps why they did not prove to be successful... The years that he spent in Warsaw (1936-1939) was a time of forced clericism. This young, lonely and unfulfilled writer who, in a sense, considered himself neither Polish nor Jewish, very much resembled a typical character from modern Hebrew literature known as *talush*²: an uprooted intellectual torn away from his family and *milieu* who did not know what to do in a new environment. The outbreak of World War II in September 1939 prevented him from maintaining the attitude of an observer uninvolved in political and national matters.

Pesach Stark found himself again in Lvov due to the war. There he joined the editorial staff of the communist daily “Czerwony Sztandar” (Red Banner). Then, after the encroachment of the Germans into Lvov in 1941, and after his wartime wanderings around the territory of the Soviet Union, this internationalist, with his “Polish-Jewish heart extracted from his chest” (Strykowski 1994), finally ended up in Moscow with the Polish communist

² This is the title of a novel by I. D. Berkowitz published in 1904.

weekly “Wolna Polska” (Free Poland). It was then in the capital city of the “world proletariat” that he received news about the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto and the tragic fate of the Jews in Poland. This is when, he recalled, he became a Jew again and a Polish writer at last. Finally, during the years 1943-1946, he produced the novel which revived the world of the Galician *shtetl*, namely *Voices in the Dark*.

Strykowski reminisced that, when he was going to school for the first time, his father, wearing a halat and with sidelocks, told him “When your teacher calls your name, you’ll say – *jestem* [literally: I am, but here it means: present!]”. The writer remarked: “It was the only Polish word I went to school with, my only equipment.” That “*jestem*,” meaning “I am a Jew,” Strykowski interpreted later as his father’s will (Strykowski 1986: 189-190). Because you are, when you own up to yourself, as Władysław Panas observed (Panas 1996: 116).

III

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries writing one’s own texts, telling stories, producing secular literature – not just studying sacred traditional texts or interpreting them – became significant and even “fashionable” amongst Jewish youths who were often devoid of the possibility of choosing a course of study or a job in the state administration. Sometimes the path of social advancement indeed led through literature, as shown by the career of not only Shalom Ash, but also of the Singer brothers. However, writing was often an idealistic solution (“against all odds” as Haim Josef Brenner, an iconic figure in young Hebrew literature, used to say), and involved living from hand to mouth with no prospect of any improvement in their gloomy situation, and such, indeed, was the fate shared by a number of Hebrew and Yiddish writers (Alter 1994: 48-49).

The two last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century was the time of the birth of modern Jewish culture, offering young people, who were just about to enter adult life, new possibilities of fulfilling themselves, and giving rise to brand new problems connected with defining one’s own identity and the choosing of social roles. What paths on the threshold of secularisation in the Polish cultural polysystem³ (Itamar Even-Zohar’s term, as used by Chone Shmeruk (1989)) did young men have to choose from, young men who came from orthodox homes, such as the later Nobel Prize winners Shmuel Josef Agnon or Isaac Bashevis Singer,

³ Compare D. Miron’s doubts in his groundbreaking study *From Continuity to Contiguity. Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking*. Stanford 2010.

or the Polish candidate for the Nobel Prize at the end of the 70s, Julian Strykowski?

Alexandre Kurc depicted four types of attitudes towards their own community, and Polish society as well, that Jews presented: 1) an integration attitude, which meant “preserving the values and cultural characteristics of the minority, [...] Jewish, or the valorisation of the majority group culture, [...] Polish” (characteristic of Haskalah and, for instance, Bund); 2) an assimilative attitude, which means identifying with the culture of the dominant group and rejecting one’s own (to some extent this was Strykowski’s case); 3) a separative attitude, which means that the minority group values its own native culture, but rejects any form of joining the majority group (for example Agnon, Singer); and 4) a marginalising attitude, which is a double negation: spurning one’s own culture, but also the culture of the majority (e.g. Communism) (Kurc 1996: 310).

There were also four main possibilities to choose from as far as the language of writing was concerned: 1) the sacred language (Biblical Hebrew with a dash of Aramaic), 2) a local language (Polish, Russian, German etc.), 3) one’s mother tongue (Yiddish), or 4) Neo-Hebraic (initially used exclusively in literature, as it was not spoken by any community at the beginning of the twentieth century). The first possible way, as used by, for instance, the youngest of the Singer brothers, Moshe, was a traditional path: a gifted young man landed in a yeshiva – a Talmudic “university” – which enabled him to become a rabbi after graduation. But the question is, if an orthodox fiction existed, or could exist at all, in the Talmudic system of Judaism? Nathan Cohen claimed that such initiatives appeared in the inter-war period in the orthodox environment (Cohen 2000), but it was only a marginal phenomenon.

Another way was assimilation into the community and its language; the first to blaze the way was Jehuda/Julian Klaczko in the middle of the nineteenth century (in the twentieth century there also arose the possibility of choosing the Polish language without the need to resign from one’s Jewish identity – this is the *casus* of the so-called Polish-Jewish literature). The third choice was Yiddish, the everyday language, a mother tongue, albeit with almost no literary traditions that would transgress the works of the classics, the so-called “grandfathers” of Yiddish literature: Sholem Yakov Abramovich, Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Leib Peretz (Isaac Bashevis Singer may serve here as another iconic figure). The fourth perspective is the path of secular modern Hebrew culture (readers may associate this with the choice of Shmuel Yosef Agnon).

The three writers, Agnon, Singer and Strykowski, are typical characters, who allow us to see three main shades on the palette of choice that Polish

Jews had on the threshold of modernity: Zionism with the Hebrew language and a homeland in Palestine, Yiddish culture with the Jewish language and the attempt to build an autonomous life in the Diaspora either in Poland or in America, and Polish culture.

Three boys, Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes (later Agnon), Icchok Zynger (later Isaac Bashevis Singer) and Pesach Stark (i.e. Julian Strykowski) came from similar homes (Band 1968; Hadda 1997; Piekarski 2010), at least at a first glance, namely religious and orthodox, where fathers were engaged in the study of holy texts and sympathized with Hassidism, a mystic trend within Judaism whose glory days and revolutionary impetus were, at the beginning of the 20th century, long in the past and had undergone a crisis. The fathers were either rabbis or Talmud teachers, or they were in trade. At home the boys spoke Yiddish on a daily basis, and studying meant simply acquiring sacred Hebrew texts. The boys received a traditional Jewish education either at home or in a *cheder*. They also learned German, and Singer and Strykowski learned Polish too. This polylingualism, oscillating on the boundaries of not only ethnos and cultures, but also of languages, was an essential trait of Diaspora Jewry. The choice of language resulted in the choice of identity. All three of the boys disappointed their parents equally, especially their fathers – after all, they became writers and not rabbis... Their shared transgressive gesture, their rejection of their fathers' way of life, appeared to be a betrayal of tradition, and writing as apostasy – this problem would become clearly visible in the works of Singer and Strykowski. Strykowski's *casus* seems to be most dramatic compared to the background of Agnon and Singer – his path led through Zionism, Communism and Polishness towards some formula of fidelity to one's self.

Julian Strykowski is a good example (or, it might be better to say, a symbol – understood here as the particle best representing the whole from which it was removed) of a man standing at the Jewish crossroads of traditions and languages. Strykowski's *casus* has been outlined very briefly as a characteristic example of a Jewish intellectual from a Galician *shtetl* running away from his father's fate, from parochial limitations and the traditional roles of leaser, tradesman, craftsman, and scholar; a young man who, having eventually chosen the Polish language as the language of his writing, lands, after a short Zionist episode, in the Communist Party's ranks, only to later leave it after several disappointments. A man longing to escape the world which he perceived in dark colours, forced by external conditions to hide his identity (and also his sexual one), whilst at the same time continuously caring (not only during a short period of clericism, but also when in Moscow and in post-war Poland) about retaining the bonds with his once-rejected Jewishness, to which he was to return years later.

Although it is hard to admit with a radically structuralist thesis that it is Language that speaks through us, it is difficult, however, to be rid of the impression that the youthful choice of a literary language decided the fate of Agnon, Singer and Strykowski (Kurs 1996; Prokop-Janiec 2001). And this is why it should not be surprising that their attachment to language happened to be the most basic characteristic of identity for them all.

*Trans. Agnieszka Piekarska
Ed. Mark Ó Fionnáin*

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**W szczelinach języków i kultur.
Julian Strykowski
– polski pisarz żydowskiego pochodzenia**

Jest to szkic o przedwojennym etapie życia i twórczości Juliana Strykowskiego – polskiego pisarza żydowskiego pochodzenia. Tożsamościowe rozterki twórcy *Głosów w ciemności* ukazane zostały na tle przemian modernizacyjnych postoświeceniowego żydostwa i zestawione z paralelnymi wyborami Szmuela Josefa Agnona i Izaaka Baszewisa Singera. Głównym celem artykułu jest ukazanie roli języka twórczości w kształtowaniu osobowej tożsamości pisarz