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The Silence of Judaica

The National Library of Poland holds a vast collection of Yiddish prints, both pre and post-war, issued mainly in contemporary and former territories of Poland. Thanks to the effort of the Library and years of digitizing the material, about 25 thousand Yiddish newspaper issues, hundreds of books, posters and leaflets were published online and made available for free at the Library's digital library polona.pl. Although the researcher's dream has not yet been fulfilled and the Yiddish OCR system has not yet been implemented in polona.pl, Yiddish scholars in Poland received a powerful and user-friendly research tool. Furthermore, by publishing scans of newspapers from big cities and smaller towns, polona.pl has revealed a forgotten or suppressed multi-linguistic and social landscape of pre-war Poland. Even if some Poles living in, for instance, present day town of Chełm knew about their town's rich Jewish history and its importance in Jewish folklore already ten or so years ago, the image was surely vague. Today, by a single click, one can literally immerse oneself into the world of pre-war Polish-Jewish reality of a small town and – even without understanding Yiddish, but simply by browsing the papers and reading Polish fragments appearing there from time to time – find out that it was more complex than one might think.

Three years ago when I had been doing rather superficial research on the Lublin Yiddish press, a particular item digitized and published by polona.pl accidentally attracted my attention. A full-paged advertisement of the famous movie *The Dybbuk* directed by Michał Waszyński, printed in September 1937 in a Yiddish daily „Lublinter Tugblat”, unexpectedly led me to an investigation and a surprising conclusion: *The Dybbuk* was probably shown publicly for the first time not in Warsaw, but in the provincial city of Lublin. In September 2015, the discovery, followed by a screening of the film, gained some publicity in mass media in Lublin at the time, exposing the journalists and local audience, usually interested in a very nostalgic image of Polish Jews, to an area of the unknown: the Yiddish cinema. Though not impossible, such research on the film's premiere, comparing notes, articles and advertisement from various Yiddish and Polish newspapers, would have been extremely difficult without an easy access to resources available online on polona.pl.

The merits of the National Library of Poland in digitizing and publishing Yiddish prints online are enormous, but while using polona.pl I have noticed that the way

the Library transliterates Yiddish titles using Latin script is fairly odd. Some of the titles are being transliterated according to the YIVO standard, others to the Polish one, but some in accordance to a very strange and unintelligible pseudo-phonetic system. Last year I contacted the Library asking them about their transliterations of Yiddish titles and, as an example, I quoted their transliteration of קויל-צייכנונגען [koyl-tseykhungen], a Yiddish translation of the well-known Polish novella *Szkice węglem* (*Charcoal Sketches*) by Henryk Sienkiewicz. In the Library's catalogue the item's title was transliterated as "Qwyl-seyyknwngen" and the author as "Henriyq Šenqewwiytš", both looking like a mistake or some kind of automatic transliteration done by a computer program.¹ After a few days I received a reply from a senior curator responsible for cataloging Judaica. The curator explained that since 2009 the National Library of Poland had transliterated both Yiddish and Hebrew titles in accordance to a standard called PN-ISO 259-2.

When I received the letter and found tables specifying transliteration methods in accordance with the mysterious PN-ISO 259-2 standard, two things seemed highly probable to me. One was that the curator is probably the sole employee in her division, which is rather understandable given the fact that the Library holds millions of books and documents in Polish and the majority of its patrons are Polish speakers. The second thing I suspected was that the curator is probably a specialist in the field of Hebrew prints and from her perspective, and probably the perspective of her employers, there is no big difference between Hebrew and Yiddish scripts. The above mentioned standard (subtitled: *Transliteration of Hebrew characters into Latin characters*), was clearly created in order to help librarians catalogue Hebrew books and is valued a solid standard in this field. But if one tries to transliterate a Yiddish title using this indicated method, one creates monsters like "Qwyl-seyyknwngen". Or yet other examples from this bestiary: „Do's Prayye' Wwo'rt" (דאָס פֿרייע וואָרט [dos fraye vort], a newspaper issued in Łódź in the 1940's), „Hiysto'riyše' Šriyptn pwn YiyW-wO'" (1937 פֿון ייוואָ, היסטאָרישע שריפטן [historishe shriftn fun yivo]), „Qwwow' wwa'diys" (קוואַ וואַדיס [kvo vadis], another example of a Yiddish translation of a book by „He'nriyq Še'nqew'wwiytš") or „Ma'ašeh 'wn liyd" (מעשה און ליד [mayse un lid], a poetry collection by Ber Shnaper, 1934).²

In 1974 a government organization called Polski Komitet Normalizacji i Miar (Polish Committee for Standardization and Measurement) issued another standard, PN-74/N-01212, developed especially to specify methods of transliterating Yiddish script into the Polish language. Though not perfect, for some reason, this useful sys-

¹ The National Library of Poland (NLP), id. 521.951.

² NLP, id. P.100303, id. P.806390, id. 512.265.

tem was forgotten or put aside and replaced by a much worse one.³ Even if the majority of Yiddish titles, both books and periodicals, held in the National Library of Poland are still transliterated according to the YIVO or old Polish standards, this new way of transliterating seems to be growing in strength and is a symptom of a fairly serious disease – both ignorance and overstating the importance of Hebrew in the history of Polish Jews.

Certainly Hebrew was important for Polish Jews and an interest in it was growing among them since the 19th century. But till the outbreak of the Second World War the Jewish street was speaking in Yiddish and sometimes in Polish, while Hebrew was still a rarity. I remember reading about Hayim Nahman Bialik's visit to the city of Lublin in late 1931. According to the local Yiddish daily *Lubliner Tugblat*, in November 1931 Bialik gave a magnificent and powerful speech about the importance of Hebrew. „Yiddish – he said in Lublin – is just an episode in the history of the Jewish people, one of many episodes, but Hebrew is eternity.”⁴ Ironically enough, during that evening Bialik gave his impressive speech not in Hebrew but in Yiddish.⁵ Hebrew speakers among Jews in pre-war Poland were a minority and it does not matter if one values Yiddish or thinks that it was a jargon of Jewish common folk. The fact is that Yiddish was the language of Polish Jews and because of that it should not be marginalized.

The bizarre method of transliterating Yiddish titles used by the National Library of Poland is not only a misuse of Hebrew transliteration standards, it simply makes the titles unintelligible, because the phonetic character of Yiddish script is completely obscured as a result. Furthermore, if the user tries to find a specific book, e.g. -קיילן צייכונגען and knows how to transliterate its title according to the YIVO or Polish standard, the transliteration method used by the Library makes the search impossible (for sure no one will search for „Qwyl-seyyknwngen” in an online or any other catalogue). Ultimately the catalogue itself becomes counterproductive, it hinders, instead of helping in a search. It's a shame that the National Library, a model for every other library in Poland, gives a bad example and sets wrong standards.

Judaica are everywhere in Poland. One can find thousands of Yiddish books, prints and manuscripts in museums and libraries or buy them on the Internet. Unfortunately, in many cases they are vandalized and taken hostage—not by a serial killer, as in the classic *The Silence of the Lambs*, but by the improper transliteration method.

³ The old system states, for instance, that the letter melupm vov (ו) is the only one that represents the phoneme /v/ while the letter vov (ו), in accordance with the system, represents the phoneme /v/. Nevertheless, compared to the above mentioned Hebrew transliteration system, the old standard (one of the first such standards in the world) is much more adequate to transliterate Yiddish script.

⁴ „Der Bialik-tog in Lublin,” *Lubliner Tugblat*, November 27 1931, p. 7.

⁵ *Lubliner Tugblat*, November 26 1931, p. 1.