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Katarzyna Taczyńska

Institute of Slavic Studies
Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8540-4132
katarzyna.taczynska@ispan.edu.pl

Between Languages and Words

Book review: *Sa druge strane pesme. Antologija poljskih jidiš pesnikinja*. Selection and translation by Biserka Rajčić. Mladenovac: Presing 2024, pp. 211. ISBN 978-86-6198-088-6

Abstract

The review presents *Sa druge strane pesme. Antologija poljskih jidiš pesnikinja* [On the Other Side of the Poem: An Anthology of Polish Yiddish Women Poets], selected and translated by Biserka Rajčić, published by Presing in Mladenovac in 2024. The review analyzes how the translation of Yiddish poetry into Serbian, through Polish translations, affects the transmission of linguistic nuances and cultural context. The text highlights the distance of the Serbian translations from the original texts and the resulting shifts in meaning, while also emphasizing the anthology's potential to inspire broader engagement with Yiddish literature and women's poetic voices within the (post)Yugoslav cultural sphere.

Keywords: Yiddish women's poetry, Yiddish, Serbian translation, Polish translation.

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When the Zagreb-based publishing house V.B.Z. released Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel *Sjene nad Hudsonom* [Shadows on the Hudson] in 2022, Miljenko Jergović, a Bosnian-Croatian writer and journalist, praised the precision and literary craftsmanship of the translation by Tomislav Kuzmanić. At the same time, he lamented the fact that the translation was based on the English edition rather than the original Yiddish. As Jergović summarized, Croatian culture is impoverished and lacks translators from Yiddish. In his review, the writer also recalled the figure of Eugen Verber (1923–1995), from "times of greater cultures and broader spirit." Verber, born in Subotica (Serbia), was an actor, writer, and translator, whose translations – among others, from Yiddish – once opened the doors of Jewish culture to the people of Yugoslavia (Jergović, 2024).

The importance of translation from the original is demonstrated by the 2024 Polish publication *Trzydzieści sześć opowiadań* [Thirty-Six Short Stories] by Isaac Bashevis Singer, edited by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska and Mariusz Lubyk. As Adamczyk-Garbowska explains in the introduction, the English-language versions of Singer's works were tailored to meet the expectations of American readers – not only by editors and publishers, but by Singer himself. In the process, many proper names, references to topography, elements of material culture, as well as proverbs and idioms were either simplified or omitted entirely. These changes stemmed from the challenges of translation and the different cultural assumptions of the target audience. While such alterations often go unnoticed by English-speaking readers, they represent a considerable loss for Polish readers, for whom these omitted details provide valuable insight into the richness and complexity of the former Polish-Jewish world. Additionally, since Yiddish is much closer to Polish than to English, direct translations tend to convey Singer's style more faithfully than those mediated through English, as has been the case with most of his works previously published in Poland (Adamczyk-Garbowska, 2024, pp. V–VI). This new translation from the original Yiddish thus marks a significant step toward restoring the linguistic nuance and cultural depth of Singer's prose for Polish audiences.

In 2024, the independent Serbian publishing house Presing, run by Predrag Milojević and "focused on discovering and promoting new literary voices on the cultural scene of Serbia and the region" (as stated on their website), released a surprising, exceptional, and intriguing publication. It is *Sa druge strane pesme. Antologija poljskih jidiš pesnikinja* [On the Other Side of the Poem: An Anthology of Polish Yiddish Women Poets], selected and translated by the distinguished translator of Polish literature into Serbian, Biserka Rajčić (2024). The collection features poems by nine poets who helped shape

the major currents of 20th-century Yiddish literature. These include: Anna Margolin (1887–1952), Celia Dropkin (1887–1956), Kadia Molodowska (1894–1975), Rachel Häring Korn (1898–1982), Esther Shumiatcher-Hirschbein (1899–1985), Debora Vogel (1900–1942), Hadasa Rubin (1906/1912?–2003), Khane Levin (1900–1969), and Rajzel Żychlińska (1910–2001).

The period before the Second World War was a time when the voices of women writing in Yiddish were especially strong. The 1920s and 1930s saw a new generation of women enter the literary scene, igniting a vibrant wave in Yiddish literature. The male-dominated literary establishment, often hostile toward them, dismissed their work as derivative and insignificant. Yet these criticisms did not silence the women writers. On the contrary, through their focus on subjects previously considered private or shameful, they expanded the boundaries of public discourse. As the renowned Yiddish scholar Karolina Szymaniak writes, "Yiddish women poets, like women authors writing in other languages, opened the language of literature to the expression of women's experience" (Szymaniak, 2018, p. 12). Undoubtedly, readers of this anthology have a rare opportunity to engage with the work of Yiddish women poets – texts which, thanks to outstanding translations, will prove both revelatory and deeply resonant.

The publication of the anthology also raises other questions and concerns, which I will address in the following part of this review – not to criticize the book, but rather to open up new avenues for its exploration. The main question that arises during the reading is that of the original language. Rajčić does not know Yiddish and relied on Polish translations, which have indeed become more available in the Polish publishing market in recent years. Chief among them is the extensive, conceptually thoughtful, and well-crafted *Moja dzika koza. Antologia poetek jidysz* [My Wild Goat: An Anthology of Yiddish Women Poets] from 2018, selected and edited by Karolina Szymaniak, Joanna Lisek, and Bella Szwarcman-Czarnota. In the afterword to her anthology, Rajčić does not explain her selection criteria, the structure of the anthology, or offer insights into the translation process specific to this work. Instead, she provides a rather general introduction about the presence of Yiddish in Polish lands. To more inquisitive readers familiar with the context, this afterword may feel insufficient. It is also worth noting that the very title of the publication is misleading, as it suggests that all the poets included in the collection came from Poland – which is not true, as anyone reading the biographical notes in the anthology can see (e.g. Chana Levin[1]).

[1] Chana Levin was born in Yekaterinoslav, in present-day Ukraine; the city is now known as Dnipro.

Let us go further and return to the reflections introduced at the beginning. Now that we know these are translations of translations, what does that mean? How far are we from the original? The original text being translated is always subject to interpretation, it is alive and continually reshaped through the work of each translator. Translation studies, by their very nature, are an interdisciplinary field, requiring the translator to navigate across multiple domains. Translating poetry, in particular, due to its form of expression, demands not only proficiency in two languages but also the ability to recreate meaning, emotion, and poetic form. Polish translators of Yiddish poetry have often spoken during lectures and book events about the difficult decisions and inner dilemmas they faced throughout the translation process. They have described moments when they sacrificed form to preserve the emotional dimension of a poem, made choices that narrowed interpretive possibilities, or grappled with homonyms and synonyms in Yiddish that opened up vastly different interpretive paths (e.g. Degler, 2025). Thus, when reading Polish translations, we are in fact dealing with the translators' own vision – an interpretation of the texts in which, by the power of their decisions, one aspect is emphasized at the expense or in favor of another.

Reading the anthology in Serbian, I read both the Polish translations and the original Yiddish texts. I reflected on the translator's lexical choices. Does it matter among what kind of knives the circus lady dances in a poem by Celia Dropkin? Kindjals, as in the Polish translation, or khanjar, as in the Serbian version? What happens when "snakes" (Yid. *shlangn*, Pol. *węże*) in a poem become "towers" (Serb. *kula*)? There are many more of these larger and smaller changes; it is not the point to list them all here. The key question is: Based on the Polish translations, to what extent was it possible to domesticate Yiddish poetry into the Serbian idiom and introduce the reader to the cultural world of Yiddish? I do have some doubts. Let us not forget, however, that as a finished product, a translation itself is also repeatedly reinterpreted by readers. That's why I am convinced this publication can serve as an excellent starting point for a broader conversation about Yiddish literature and women's poetry – literary traditions virtually unknown in the (post-)Yugoslav cultural sphere.

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Pomiędzy językami i słowami

Recenzja przedstawia antologię *Sa druge strane pesme. Antologija poljskih jidiš pesnikinja* [Po drugiej stronie wiersza. Antologia polskich poetek jidysz], w wyborze i przekładzie Biserki Rajčić, opublikowaną przez wydawnictwo Presing w Mladenovacu w 2024 roku. Recenzja analizuje, jak przekład poezji jidysz na język serbski za pośrednictwem przekładów polskich wpływa na przekaz niuansów językowych i kontekstu kulturowego. Tekst wskazuje na dystans serbskich przekładów wobec oryginalnych utworów i wynikające z tego przesunięcia znaczeń, a jednocześnie podkreśla potencjał antologii do inspirowania szerszego zainteresowania literaturą jidysz oraz kobiecymi głosami poetyckimi w (post)jugosłowiańskiej sferze kulturowej.

Słowa kluczowe: poezja kobiet w jidysz, jidysz, przekład serbski, przekład polski.

Note

Katarzyna Taczyńska, Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland.
katarzyna.taczynska@ispan.edu.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8540-4132

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