

ITZHAK KATZENELSON'S *DOS LID FUN OYSGEHARGETN YIDISHN FOLK*¹
IN TRANSLATION: THE FIRST FOUR DECADES

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Abstract: In this article we sketch the history of Katzenelson's lament *Dos lid fun oysgehargetn yidishn folk* in translation, from the publication of the Yiddish original in 1945 to the fall of the Berlin Wall. We first present Katzenelson's 'testament'—a letter to his relatives Berl Katzenelson and Yitzhak Tabenkin, important Labour politicians in Eretz Israel—which expresses the poet's hopes concerning the publication and translation of the Lament after the war. Subsequently, we discuss the translations of the poem, highlighting the involvement of the Ghetto Fighters' House.

Itzhak Katzenelson's Lament occupies a unique position in world literature. As pointed out by Primo Levi (1995 [1963]: 5) in his introduction to the first Italian translation of *Dos lid*:

Davanti al «cantare» di Yitzhak Katzenelson ogni lettore non può che arrestarsi turbato e reverente. Non è paragonabile ad alcun'altra opera nella storia di tutte le letterature: è la voce di un morituro, uno fra centinaia di migliaia di morituri, atrocemente consapevole del suo destino singolo e del destino del suo popolo.

[When confronted with Katzenelson's 'singing', the reader cannot but feel shaken and reverent. It is not comparable to any other work in the history of all literatures: it is a voice of someone about to die, of one among hundreds of thousands about to die, bitterly conscious of his particular destiny and the destiny of his whole people].²

This singularly tragic status of 'the last of one's people', feeling the burden of obligation "to bemoan [its] destruction and annihilation" (Katzenelson 1964: 45), led Katzenelson to compose in the Vittel internment camp a poetic 'monument' and a 'tombstone' for European Jewry.

Katzenelson was well aware of the significance of his work. In his 'testament', a letter to his relatives in Palestine (Berl Katzenelson and Yitzhak Tabenkin, leaders of the

¹ We use the YIVO transcription of Yiddish but since Katzenelson's name is transcribed differently in various languages, the spelling in our sources (and also in our English text) is not always the same.

² All translations from non-English sources: AP&MS.

Labour movement), which was smuggled out from Vittel together with a manuscript of the Lament by Ruth Adler, he expressed high hopes about its future:

Only you and my cousin will read this Lament for our people slain in its entirety, with its infants and its babies in the wombs of their mothers. Do not publish this Lament in its fifteen chapters or print it, as long as the curse of man still rages upon earth. *If both of you find it proper and necessary that this Lament should be translated into other languages in order that the nations should know what they too have done to us, since they, too, have been used by and helped this abomination of the nations, the Germans, in the murder of our whole people, not only the Lithuanian and Ukrainian murderers... then keep the translations with you as well until the end of the War.* I do not believe that I shall live until that day. Begin the publication of the Lament chapter by chapter in the Jewish press, all on the same day. Only after the fifteen chapters have been disseminated should you publish them as a book. Print the Lament with a dedication to the soul of my Hannah and my brother Berl, who were killed with their families and with my whole people, without any grave. (Katzenelson 1958: 27; emphasis AP&MS).

The letter reached the addressees in July 1944 (Shapira 1984: 320) but had little impact on the subsequent history of the Lament (see Pawelec, Sitarz 2016: 86). That was not because Katzenelson's compatriots in Eretz Israel were negligent—as we will see below, highly-placed Israeli politicians were involved in the publication of the Yiddish original, the Hebrew translation, and also the first German translation of the Lament, while Katzenelson's wartime friends did not spare any effort in making his literary heritage available both in Israel and all over the world. It was rather because Katzenelson's tribute to the 'murdered Jewish people' was—for almost half a century—unwanted by most audiences, with the exception of the Jewish survivors, their families, and the few who believed it was their duty to commemorate the victims of the Shoah. We would like to present below a sketch of the Lament's reception in translation in this first phase, ending roughly with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The process of publication started in Paris in late 1944 through the joint efforts of Miriam Novitch, who saved another manuscript in the Vittel camp, and Nathan Eck, who typed it and supervised the publication. Since Eck was invited by the Jewish Writers Association to visit the USA in June 1945, the process of editing was cut short. Eck was able to correct the final proofs of only the first two cantos, while the rest remained uncorrected. The proofs, which Eck had brought with him to America together with Katzenelson's manuscripts, were used for a public reading of the whole Lament by well-known Yiddish writers (Lustiger 1994: 231). Shortly afterwards, Eck received a letter from Paris written by Aaron Tsziling (Israel's future Minister of Agriculture) who asked him not to publish the Lament because the original, smuggled out by Ruth Adler, was being prepared for publication in Eretz Israel by Katzenelson's relatives. Eck was happy to oblige.³ It turned out, however, that Eck's partly uncorrected edition was published in Paris after all, probably because its sponsors, the Paris section of the Joint, refused to comply with Tsziling's request (see Ek 1964: 34-35). Nevertheless, the publication

³ In the Ghetto Fighters' House Archives there is a letter (dated July 16th, 1945) from Nathan Eck to Y. Marminsky in New York, in which Eck states that he is handing over the original manuscripts of Itzhak Katzenelson's works *The Song of the Murdered Jewish People*, the drama *Hannibal*, and some other materials in Hebrew and in Yiddish (Cat. No. 22076, Holdings Registry, <http://infocenters.co.il/gfh/list.asp> [accessed 26 August 2015]); these manuscripts subsequently reached the Ghetto Fighters' House).

was fortunate since the Eretz Israel edition of the Lament announced by Tsziling (and supervised by Katzenelson's friend from Łódź, Menahem Poznanski) took another two years to materialise (as part of Katzenelson's *Last Writings*, 1947). As we can see, the publication of the Yiddish original was a far cry from Katzenelson's high hopes. The Lament was clearly important for the Jewish survivors in Europe,⁴ but it was not awaited as a call to national mourning in Eretz Israel, which invested all its energies in the struggle for national independence. What is no less significant, the newly born State of Israel (1948) declared Hebrew its official language. As a result, it not only demoted Yiddish to a marginal status but, more generally, turned its back on the perished world of *Yiddishkeit*—the world which was at the centre of Katzenelson's allegiance (despite his love for Hebrew and Zionist beliefs).

This historical context helps one understand the paradoxical fact that the Lament's first translation was into Hebrew. It was ready in 1947 for inclusion in Katzenelson's *Last Writings* but was published as a separate volume in 1948 (Even-Shoshan 1958: 30). The Hebrew translation was paradoxical, if not outright contrary to Katzenelson's intentions: as a bilingual author, he had chosen to write the Lament in Yiddish rather than in Hebrew as a tribute to the murdered people of Yiddishland.⁵ His decision reflected the complex coexistence of both Jewish languages in his literary *oeuvre* (and also in the life of the Jewish community at large). Before the war, he had written primarily in Hebrew and was considered to be one of the revivers of this sacred language for secular purposes (a Zionist goal). During the war, as an educator and author, he wrote almost exclusively in Yiddish (and translated many of his earlier works from Hebrew into Yiddish) to reach the Jewish population of the Warsaw Ghetto, and possibly also as a sign of solidarity with the Yiddishland which was on a verge of obliteration. While in Vittel, he switched to Hebrew in his writings. This is visible in the very first sentence he wrote on the day of his arrival: "My son Zvi and I are now in Vittel" (1964: 43). The phrase "My son Zvi and I" was written in Yiddish but Katzenelson put it in brackets and continued in Hebrew.⁶ Except for *Dos lid...*, all major works written in Vittel were composed in Hebrew, probably to mark the author's distance from some of the neighbouring Jews, who in his eyes were eager to renounce their Jewishness. The editors of the *Last Writings* were clearly aware of this historical context and their decision to publish the Hebrew translation of the La-

⁴ Apart from the Paris 1945 edition, the first five cantos were published in two subsequent issues of the journal אײך זען פֿרײ אײך זען פֿרײ [Af der frey, Free again] by the inmates of the Displaced Persons Centre in Stuttgart (Katzenelson 1946, 2-3). The importance of the Lament for the survivors can be gauged by the reaction of Arno Lustiger: „Nach meinen Erhaftungen in Auschwitz, Buchenwald und anderen Lagern hielt ich es für ausgeschlossen, dass die Leiden der Juden mit literarischen Mitteln adäquat dargestellt werden konnten. Katzenelson hat mich vom Gegenteil überzeugt“ [After my experiences in Auschwitz, Buchenwald and other camps, I believed it was impossible to adequately represent with literary means the suffering of the Jews. Katzenelson convinced me otherwise] (1994: 230).

⁵ It can be argued that Hebrew would have been the more natural choice for Katzenelson as the language of his Lament since Yiddish was not sufficiently 'literary' to tackle the subject of such epic and tragic proportions; additionally, Bialik's *In the City of Slaughter*, written in Hebrew as a reaction to the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, offered an obvious point of reference for Katzenelson (it was the poem he read out to Miriam Novitch during their last meeting in Vittel, see: Cohen 1964: 37).

⁶ See the manuscript of פּינקס וויטל [Pinkas Vittel] in the Ghetto Fighters' House Archives, Cat. No. 6630, Collections Section, <http://infocenters.co.il/gfh/search.asp?lang=ENG> [accessed 26 Juny 2017]; see also: Roskies, Diamant 2012: 71, 203.

ment separately can perhaps be treated as an attempt to respect Katzenelson's choice. In the next enlarged edition of the *Last Writings* (1956), which also comprised works written in the Warsaw Ghetto, the inclusion of the Yiddish original, along with its Hebrew translation, required special pleading: "In dealing with such major works, in which the poet invested his heart and soul at a time of anguish and distress, we did not feel justified in concealing the originals and merely publishing translations" (Even-Shoshan 1958: 30-31). It seems clear that the Hebrew translation of *Dos lid...* not only made the text available to the Israeli public, but also played a part in the wider tendency of marginalizing the Yiddish language.⁷

The Hebrew translation of the Lament was not particularly successful. It was completed by Menahem Zalman Wolfowski, a Hebrew poet and writer in his own right as well as a prolific translator from Russian (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev).⁸ There is an account by Benjamin Katzenelson (Itzhak's nephew), related by Wolf Biermann, that Tabenkin approached a much more distinguished Hebrew and Yiddish author, Zalman Shneour, during his visit in Israel to commission the translation of the Lament but Shneour demanded a fee which was too high for the publishers (Biermann 1994c: 210). The story is (at least partly) apocryphal since Shneour visited Israel only in 1949, a year after Wolfowski's translation was published. The anecdote reveals, nevertheless, a real dissatisfaction with the Hebrew translation. As pointed out by Yonat Sened (who attended Katzenelson's Bible class in the Warsaw Ghetto⁹): "Our Hebrew translation is not worth discussing. It is not read at all; it does not appeal to anyone, least of all the young. The Hebrew of this translation [...] is dead" (*ibid.*).¹⁰ This sorry outcome may only be blamed in part on developments in modern Hebrew, however. The deeper reasons (apart from the questions of literary quality) involve Israel's attitude to *Galut* in general, and to Yiddishland in particular.

The next translation of *Dos lid* appeared in 1951. It was completed by Hermann Adler, a German Jew who was saved in Vilna by Anton Schmid, the Austrian 'righteous among the nations'. As Adler commented years later: "It was Schmid who gave me hope that a better Germany may be reborn" (quoted in Popp 2013: 140). In 1949, Adler was approached by Zalman Shazar, the Israeli Minister of Education and a future President of Israel, who commissioned him to prepare a German translation of the Lament: "a testament of the dead to warn the living where hate may lead the human race" (*ibid.*: 137). Understandably, the translation was conceived in the spirit of reconciliation. In his preface, written at the beginning of the cold war period, Adler goes as far as to connect Katzenelson's apocalyptic vision of the final conflagration of Heaven and Earth with the threat of nuclear annihilation:

⁷ It is, however, a factual distortion (characteristic of Biermann's attitude) to claim that "In Palestine or Israel no one wanted to hear about the publication of the Yiddish original. The Hebrew translation was all they wanted" (Biermann 1994b: 224).

⁸ Biermann, who seems to know little about Wolfowski, dismisses him with the following ironic (and erroneous) comment: "His most important work—*The History of Labour Movement in Israel (Palestine)*—was not exactly a good preparation for translating Katzenelson's Lament" (1994: 211). A concise appreciation of Wolfowski's work can be found in Sheffi 2011: 174.

⁹ Her description of the class can be found in Sened 2008.

¹⁰ Yechiel Szeintuch, on the contrary, values Wolfowski's translation highly; he accepts that the text may be impenetrable to the younger generation but believes that a special effort is required whenever one deals with literary monuments (personal communication).

Als Warnung diene seine Dichtung, und seine Warnung wirke versöhnend. Wüchse nämlich der Haß weiter, heute, da die Menschheit in ihrer Gesamtheit vor der Möglichkeit steht, ausgerottet zu werden, dann könnte geschehen, was der entsetzte Dichter prophetisch ausruft: Aufsteigen wird die Erdenflamme, um den Himmel zu verbrennen, und verbrennen wird des Himmels Flamme unsre Erd.

[Let his poem serve as a warning and let the warning bring reconciliation. If hatred spreads today even more, then the whole human race will face complete destruction and the terrible prophecy of the poet could come true: may the fire from the Earth reach Heaven and the fire from Heaven burn the Earth (Adler 1951: 7)].¹¹

Adler's translation was published in Zurich by Oprecht Verlag but it had a very limited influence on the German-language literary scene.¹² It was reprinted in 1992 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Wannsee Conference (Richter 1992: 5).

Subsequent translations of the Lament into other European languages (Italian, French and English) were prepared under the auspices of the Ghetto Fighters' House (Beit Lohamei Haghetat), and especially Miriam Novitch, Katzenelson's fellow-inmate from the Vittel camp. Novitch became the curator of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum—the first museum of the Shoah, founded in 1949 (four years before Yad Vashem). She often travelled to Europe and established many contacts there. The Italian translation was probably published in 1963¹³ by 'Amici di Beit Lohamei Haghetat' [The Friends of Ghetto Fighters' House] in Turin. It was prepared by Fausta Beltrami-Segre with the help of Miriam Novitch. This edition is notable primarily for the short introduction written by Primo Levi (quoted at the beginning of this article), which was reprinted in the subsequent editions of this translation (1966, 1977) and also in a new one by Daniel Vogelmann (Katzenelson 1995: 5-6). Otherwise, the translation is of limited value. It does not contain all 15 cantos of the Lament (cantos 3, 5, 10 and 14 are missing) and the ones included are not always complete (canto 7 lacks the first four stanzas). What is more, the dates placed by Katzenelson under particular cantos¹⁴ are sometimes mixed up. As a result, the first two cantos are published in the wrong order. The French translation, published in 1970 by 'L'Association des Originaires de Lodz' [The Society of Former Residents of Lodz], was completed again by a tandem of translators: Miriam Novitch and Suzanne Der. This abridged edition is based on the Italian one, except that the first two cantos are now printed in the right order.

The English translation of the Lament (1980) was clearly a very important publishing project for the Ghetto Fighters' House. For the first time, the translation was printed side by side with the facsimile of the Lament's manuscript.¹⁵ The text was translated

¹¹ Adler refers here to the final line of Canto 9 of *Dos lid...*, see: Davies 2014: 715.

¹² So much so that the next German translation of Katzenelson's Lament (Biermann 1994) was often perceived as the *first* German-language translation; see: Nader 2007: 233, note 29.

¹³ Apparently, neither of the 'Amici di Beit Lohamei Haghetat' editions is dated. According to the third edition, published in 1977, the 'Amici' edition (only one is mentioned) was published in 1966 in Turin (the title page). However, the second 'Amici' edition, we have inspected, was certainly published in Nice and it contains a note giving the first date of publication as 1963 (p. 10).

¹⁴ All of Katzenelson's manuscripts written during the war have exact dates (day, month, year), see: Szeintuch 1984: IV.

¹⁵ One of six manuscripts of the Lament which were extant after the war (five of which are kept in the Ghetto Fighters' House Archive, Cat. No. 6631, Collections Section, <http://infocenters.co.il/gfh/search>).

by a distinguished Jewish scholar Rabbi Dr. Noah Rosenbloom, a professor of Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women. Rosenbloom also wrote a comprehensive and erudite afterword 'The Threnodist and the Threnody of the Holocaust' (1980: 91-133). The English edition to some extent achieved its goal: both the text of the Lament, and Rosenbloom's essay entered the academic debate about the Shoah.¹⁶ It failed however, like the Italian and French literal translations, to convey the poetic force of the original.

The Polish translation, which appeared in 1982, was exceptional in more than one respect. It was the first translation of the Lament completed by a non-Jew and it was published without the support of the Ghetto Fighters' House.¹⁷ Jerzy Ficowski, the translator, was a poet in his own right who had published a volume of poetry commemorating the extermination of Jews in Poland (1979). In the introduction, he confessed that "My intention was to make the translation invisible, to let the murdered poet say the same thing once again—in Polish" (1982: 11). We have tried to show elsewhere (Pawelec, Sitarz 2016) that this lofty aim of every ambitious translator was in this case an impossible goal: the translation was conceived by Ficowski as a tribute to "Our brethren, the Polish Jews, on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of their struggle in the Warsaw Ghetto" (Kaczenelson 1982: 5), while Katzenelson viewed assimilation as a betrayal of Jewishness.¹⁸ Yonat (Janka) Sened, who was born in 1926 in Częstochowa and, as we already know, attended Katzenelson's Bible class in the Warsaw Ghetto, offered a back-handed compliment on Ficowski's work in a conversation with Wolf Biermann: "He translated Katzenelson's Lament into an excellent Polish poem, perhaps one that Katzenelson himself would write in peace after 1945, if he had managed to escape his murderers" (Biermann 1994: 209).

To reduce the story of the Lament's reception to bare numbers: in the first four decades after its publication, only four full translations (Hebrew [Wolfowski], German [Adler], English [Rosenbloom], and Polish [Ficowski]) and two abridged ones (Italian [Beltrami-Segrè & Novitch] and French [Novitch & Der]) were published.¹⁹ In the

asp?lang=ENG [accessed 25 July 2017]). The manuscript printed in the English edition was probably used by Nathan Eck to prepare the first edition of the Yiddish original (Paris 1945); see Sitarz, Pawelec 2018 [in print].

¹⁶ Two cantos from Rosenbloom's translation (6 and 15) are available online on the Simon Wiesenthal Center's site: <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=ivKVLcMVIIsG&b=476157> [accessed 9 August 2017].

¹⁷ There is no reference to the Ghetto Fighters' House in the first 1982 edition. However, in 1986 'Czytelnik' published the second, bilingual edition (Polish-Yiddish) in cooperation with the Ghetto Fighters' House.

¹⁸ See, for instance, canto 3 on the Jewish police in the ghetto (especially 3.6) and canto 5 on Adam Czerniaków, the President of the Judenrat (especially 5.9-10); in both cases, Ficowski expressed Katzenelson's revulsion in universalistic ethical terms rather than in particularistic ethnic terms.

¹⁹ In the Ghetto Fighters' House Archives there is also a translation into Romanian, a typewritten copy prepared in 1953 by Zvi Weinberg for his children Iudit, Iosef, Malca and Sara (as he states in the introduction). The copies of this translation are listed under the Cat. No. 12764, Holdings Registry, <http://infocenters.co.il/gfh/list.asp> [accessed 25 August 2015]. Under the Cat. No. 2244, Holland Section, <http://infocenters.co.il/gfh/list.asp> [accessed 25 August 2015] there is also a document looking like a typewritten copy (with the pages numbered by hand) containing a Dutch translation by Annabelle Herciger. There is neither a date on the title page, nor any other information as to whether this translation was actually published, apart from the statement: „Uitgegeven door de vereniging far afkomstigen uit Lodz" [Published by the Society of Former Residents of Lodz]. In the short foreword Annabelle Herciger states that Miriam Novitch gave her the French translation and asked her to prepare a translation into Dutch. She also writes that she is the daughter of an Auschwitz survivor, Sam Herciger (1917-1981) which places the translation after 1981. Both catalogue entries and the files linked to them are accessible only from the computers inside the Archives. We have not been able to find any information that the translations were actually published.

next three decades, the Lament was translated thirteen times into ten languages: Russian (twice: 1992 [Bauch], 2000 [Etkind]), Spanish (1993 [Toker]), German (twice: 1994 [Biermann], 1996 [Homfeld]), Italian (twice: 1995 [Sohn & Vogelmann], 2009 [de Luca]), Dutch (1996 [Brill]), Swedish (1998 [Nelhans]), Japanese (1999 [Asukai & Hosomi]), French (2005 [Baum]), Ladino (2006 [Pons]) and Hungarian (2014 [Halasi]). There is a larger story to be told, which must take into account not only literary issues, but also—and perhaps more importantly—cultural and historical ones.

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