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TRANSLATING THE UNTRANSLATABLE:
A YIDDISH TEXT IN JAPANESE RENDERING

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Abstract

The paper collects some Yiddish words which do not lend themselves to easy translation and investigates the way they are rendered into Japanese. This is done with the example of the 1999 Japanese translation of Yitskhok Katsenelson’s *Song of the murdered Jewish people*. Japanese renderings of selected fifteen lexemes reflecting the culture, religion and everyday life of the Yiddish speakers are gathered, analyzed as for their structure and compared with their German, English, Spanish, French, Polish and Russian counterparts.

The present paper was delivered at the 15th International Conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies, Lisbon, 30 August – 2 September 2017. For providing me with many valuable materials relating to Y. Katsenelson most heartfelt thanks are due to Magdalena Sitarz and Andrzej Pawelec (both of the Jagiellonian University), and for his English-language assistance – to Joshua A. Fogel (York University). Languages using scripts other than the Roman alphabet are herein Romanized according to the following systems: Arabic – transcription of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft; pre-modern Hebrew (from Biblical to Mediaeval) – transcribed uniformly according to the system expounded in Joüon, Muraoka (1996); Japanese – Hepburn transcription; Russian – linguistic transliteration; Yiddish – YIVO transcription.
Yitskhok Katsenelson (also spelt Katzenelson) was a Jewish teacher, poet, playwright and translator, writing in both Hebrew and Yiddish. He was born in 1885, 1886, or perhaps 1887, in Karelichy (Карэлічы, present-day Belarus), but from 1896 on he lived permanently in Łódź (Poland). He was married to Khane, with whom he had three sons: Tsvi, Bentsien and Benyomen. After the outbreak of the Second World War he and his family soon found themselves in the Warsaw ghetto. On 14 August 1942 his wife and two younger sons were deported to Treblinka, for immediate death in the gas chambers. After the ghetto uprising of 1943, he and the oldest son Tsvi fled to the Aryan side; they obtained Honduran passports, yet after arriving at the infamous Hotel Polski they did not leave for Central America but were instead carried to the internment camp in Vittel, north-eastern France. There Katsenelson wrote in Hebrew his Pinkas Vitel ("The Vittel diary", 22 May – 16 Sept. 1943) and in Yiddish – Dos lid fun oysgehargetn yidishn folk ("The song of the murdered Jewish people", 3 Oct. 1943 – 17 Jan. 1944). On 17 April 1944 Yitskhok and his son were taken away to the transit camp in Drancy, near Paris, and from there dispatched on 27 April to Auschwitz. Upon their arrival on 30 April 1944, they were murdered in a gas chamber, most probably already on 1 May.

The Ghetto Fighters’ Kibbutz (Kibuts Loḥamey ha-Geta’ot), founded in 1949 and located in Western Galilee, Israel, established in the same year the “Itzhak Katzenelson Holocaust and Jewish Resistance Heritage Museum”, also called the Ghetto Fighters’ House (Beyt Loḥamey ha-Geta’ot), where many manuscripts, printed works and other Katsenelsoniana are being preserved.

Dos lid fun oysgehargetn yidishn folk, a poem of fifteen cantos comprised of fifteen four-line stanzas each, is one of the most shattering literary accounts of the Holocaust and a testimony all the more precious that it was written down when the mass murder was still taking place. It has been published many times in its Yiddish original, and translated into over a dozen languages, including (in alphabetical order): Dutch, English, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Ladino, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Swedish, sometimes even more than once.

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3 Most of the consulted editions and translations give the final date as 18 Jan. 1944, but the manuscript copies of Dos lid... preserved at the Ghetto Fighters’ House Archives and available online (GFHA: Collections Section, Catalogue No. 6631) bear the date “17/1”, so the 18 must be a misprint repeated from one edition to another.

4 The above is based on: Zilbertsvayg (1967), Ficowski (1986) and Holtzman (2010), where more information on Yitskhok Katsenelson can also be found.

5 For details, see Sitarz, Pawelec (2014-), as well as Pawelec, Sitarz (2017: 78–79).
The Japanese version, entitled Horobosareta Yudaya no tami no uta 滅ぼされたユダヤの民の歌, appeared in the Tokyo publishing house Misuzu みすず in 1999, and it was prepared by two Germanists: Asukai Masatomo 飛鳥井雅友 and Hosomi Kazuyuki 細見和之, with Nishi Masahiko 西成彦 serving as their adviser. The translation is deliberately very faithful, almost literal, as can be seen from the following excerpt (canto 1: stanza 1: line 1–4, hereafter given in the abbreviated format: “1:1:1–4”).

6 Cf. Asukai, Hosomi (1999: 156): “訳文はあくまでカツェネルソンの原文にできるだけ忠実に訳している” (“We have done our best to make the translation as faithful to Katsenelson’s original as possible”). – All unattributed English translations here and below are my own and they are intended to be as literal as possible, bordering on linguistic glossing.

The present paper aims at collecting some words found in Katsenelson’s “Song…” which seem untranslatable (or difficult to translate) and investigating the way they are rendered into Japanese. The phenomenon in question is not literal impossibility of translating a given Yiddish word, but rather the situation in which a certain language
possesses no equivalent other than a borrowing from Yiddish (or from the Hebrew source of the Yiddish word), and this is regardless of whether the borrowing is long established in the language or whether it appears for the first time in the given translation; perhaps “untranslatedness” would be a better term here than untranslatability. To the said end canto eight has been chosen, *Eyn khor-eve, eyn umgebrakhte heym* (אײַן חרובֿע, אײַן אומגע -בראַכטע הײם (“Nothing but a devastated, nothing but a slaughtered home”), which depicts a scene in a synagogue and therefore contains quite numerous items related to Judaism.

Translations into six European languages will serve for comparative purposes, two of them being Germanic, two Romance and two Slavonic, all spoken in countries with a (once) considerable Jewish population:

- German (DE), by Wolf Biermann (1994)\(^7\)
- English (EN), by Noah H. Rosenbloom (1980)
- Spanish (ES), by Eliahu Toker (2006)
- French (FR), by Batia Baum (2007)
- Polish (PL), by Jerzy Ficowski (1986)
- Russian (RU), by Efrem Baux (1992).

The Yiddish words in question (YI) are listed below with their European-language equivalents, the latter being divided into two groups: Yiddish- or Hebrew-derived terms vs. all other devices, and then followed by the Japanese counterparts (JA) used by Asukai Masatomo and Hosomi Kazuyuki (1999). It seems significant that certain words are provided with an annotation or explained in a glossary, so the presence of such information will in each case be indicated, as “note” or “gloss” respectively. And here is the list compiled on the basis of the eighth canto of *Dos lid…* (occurrences outside this canto are not taken into account):

1. **YI (di) shul**¹ (די) שול) ‘synagogue’ (8:6:1+2+3, 8:12:2, 8:13:3)
   
   FR *shul* + gloss
   
   DE *Betstube* || *Synagoge*, EN *synagogue*, ES *sinagoga* || *templo*, FR *synagogue*, PL *bóżnica* ‘synagogue’,\(^8\) RU *sinagoga* *cunaza*o
   
   JA *shinagōgu* シナゴーグ ‘synagogue (< English)’ + note

\(^7\) For more on Biermann and his translation, see e.g. Sitarz, Pawelec (2015), with further bibliographic data.

Dust jacket of the Japanese translation of 1999
2. YI (di) bime (בימה) ‘bema / bima(h) / almemar,’ i.e. the platform in a synagogue, usually centrally situated, from which the Torah is read out, prayers are conducted etc.’ (8:6:3+4, 8:12:3)

DE Bima, EN Bimah + note, ES almemar, PL bima + note
DE Thora-Pult, FR tribune, RU altar’ алтарь ‘altar’
JA sekkyôdan 説教壇 ‘in a church: pulpit, in a mosque: minbar / mimbar (lit. a platform for preaching / for expounding the teachings)’ + note

3. YI (der) orn-koydesh (אָרוֹן־קודֵשׁ) ‘the (Holy) Ark, i.e. the cabinet or the cupboard built into an alcove, covered with a curtain, in which the Torah scrolls are kept in a synagogue’ (8:6:2, 8:13:3)

PL aron-hakodesz + note
DE Bundeslade, EN ark, ES arca sagrada, FR arche sainte, RU škaf dlja svitkov ишкаф для свитков ‘cupboard for scrolls’
JA seihitsu 聖櫃 ‘in a synagogue: the Holy Ark, in a church: tabernacle (lit. a sacred chest)’ + note

4. YI sifre-toyres (סְפִירֵי־תּוּרֶא) ‘a parchment scroll of the Torah (= the Pentateuch), kept in a synagogue’ (8:6:1, 8:13:3)

DE Thora-Rolle, Thora, EN Torah, ES rollo de la Torá, FR rouleau de la Torah rolleau de la Torah, PL Tora + note, RU svjaščennaja Tora священная Тора ‘the holy Torah’
EN scroll, PL rodał ‘a parchment scroll of the Torah’, RU svjaščennaja kniga священная книга ‘holy book’
JA Tōrā no makimono ホーラーの巻き物 ‘Torah scroll’ + note

5. YI (der) rov (רְוִ) ‘rabi (especially an Orthodox one)’ (8:6:3, 8:7:1, 8:9:3+4, 8:10:3 [2×], 8:11:2+3+4, 8:12:2+3, 8:13:1+4), plural: rabonim רבונים (8:6:1)

DE Rabbi, Rebbe, Rabbiner, EN rabbi, ES rabino, FR rabbin, PL rabin, RU ravin раввин, rabbi равви + note, rav рав

JA rabi ラビ ‘rabi (< Hebrew rabbi רבי)’ + note

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8 Polish bóźnica (earlier boźnica), a derivative of Bóg ‘God’, was until the seventeenth century used for any temple: a synagogue, a mosque, an Orthodox church, but now it only means a Jewish one (Boryś 2005: 37).

9 English almemar (~ almemor ~ almimar) < Mediaeval Hebrew almemor אלמעאמר < Arabic al-minbar المذبح ‘the’ + pulpit, rostrum, platform, dais’ (Klein 1987: 31).

10 But in 8:6:2 of the Russian translation there is the word amvon амвон ‘ambo, pulpit’, not corresponding to anything in particular in the original (the translation is quite free).

11 Polish rodal < Middle High German rodal ~ rodel ‘scroll, list, register, document’ (> Modern German Rodel) < Mediaeval Latin rōtūla ~ rōtūlus ‘scroll’ < Latin ‘little wheel, small circle’, diminutive of Latin rōta ‘wheel, circle, ring’.
6. **YI (der) rebe** (רבי) ‘Hasidic rabbi, rebbe, tsaddik; Rabbi!, Teacher! (form of address used towards a rabbi, a tsaddik or a teacher)’ (8:7:4, 8:8:1+4, 8:9:1+4)
   DE *Rabbi‖ Rebbe*, EN *rabbi*, ES *rebe*, FR *rabbi + gloss*, PL *Rabi‖ tój Rabi‘my Rabbi’, RU *rabbi rabbi + note‖ naš rabbi-pravednik наш рабби-праведник ‘our Rabbi – the righteous one’
   JAP *rabi ラビ‘rabbi’ – as above

7. **YI reb** (רב) ‘Reb (title or form of address, used preceding a man’s forename), Mr, Sir’ (8:6:3)
   JAP *-san さん‘Mr, Mrs, Miss, Ms’

8. **YI (der) shames** (שַׂמֵּש) ‘shammes / shammash, i.e. a sexton or a beadle in a synagogue, a caretaker in a Jewish community institution, a rabbincal court or a benevolent society etc., also a personal assistant to a rabbi’ (8:9:2+3, 8:10:1+2+4, 8:12:1+2, 8:13:1+4)
   DE *Schammes*, FR *shames + gloss*, PL *szames + note*, RU *šames шамес + note*
   DE *Synagogendiener*, EN *sexton*, ES *bedel de la sinagoga‖ bedel, FR *bedeau*
   JAP *dōmori 堂守‘temple guardian / custodian (lit. ditto)’; once (in 8:10:1) the phrase *shinagōgu no bannin シナゴーグの番人‘keeper / caretaker of the synagogue’

The above list can be supplemented with several more terms of the same semantic field, found in other cantos:

9. **YI (der) Yom-kiper / Yon-kiper** (יומ-כיפור) ‘Yom Kippur, Day of Atonement, the most solemn religious holiday celebrated as a day of fasting and prayers of penitence’ (6:2:1)
   DE *Jom Kippur*, EN *Yom Kippur + note*
   JAP *Shokuzai no Hi ⟨Yomu Kipūru⟩ 賢日の日 ‘Day of Atonement (lit. ditto)’ + note

10. **YI (der) Peysekh** (פּסח) ‘Passover, Pesa(c)h, Feast of the Unleavened Bread, a major festival celebrated in spring to commemorate the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery’ (14:15:1 [2×])
    DE *Pessach‖ Passahfest [sic]*, ES *Pesaj*, FR *Pâque*, PL *Pascha*, RU *pasxal’nyj seder пасхальный седер ‘Passover Seder (= ritual service and ceremonial meal)’ + note
EN Passover
JA Sugikoshi no Matsuri 過越の祭 ‘Passover (lit. Festival of Passing)’ + note (also shortened to matsuri 祭 ‘festival’)

11. YI (der) tales דער טאלɨס (שאַלט) ‘tallit(h), prayer shawl, a white shawl with fringed corners worn by men at prayer’ (13:6:2)
EN talis + note, PL tales, RU tales малес + note
DE Gebetsschal, ES manto de oraciones, FR châle de prière
JA tarito タリート ‘tallith (< Hebrew ְתallisמ)’ + note

12. YI (der) kheyder דער קײַדער (קרײַדער) ‘(c)heder, i.e. an all-day elementary religious school for boys aged 3/5 to 13’ (15:9:2)
EN heder + note, ES jeider + note, PL cheder + note, RU xeder xeцеп + note
DE Schule, FR étude
JA Yudaya gakkō ユダヤ学校 ‘Jewish school’

13. YI yeshivesnishкатא, plural of (di) yeshive לשיבא (וישיבא) ‘yeshiva, i.e. a religious academy or college for unmarried men aged 13/14 to over 20, devoted to the advanced study of rabbinical literature and the Talmud’ (15:11:1+3)
DE Jeschiwe [sic], EN yeshiva (here plural: yeshivoth) + note, ES ieshive + note, PL jeszybot + note, RU ешива евива
FR école talmudique
JA Yudaya shingakkō (yeshiva) ユダヤ神 学 校 ‘Jewish seminary’ + note (also shortened to shingakkō 神学校 ‘seminary, theological school’)

14. YI (der / dos) bes-medresh דוּרשׁ / דוּרשׁ (דות) ‘a public prayer and study house located at or near the synagogue’ (15:11:1)
ES beis-medresh + note, PL Bet-hamidrasz + note
DE Betstube, EN synagogue, FR maison de prière, RU omitted
JA kitōsho (beto midorashu) 祈禱所 ‘prayer room, chapel, oratory (lit. place of prayer)’ + note

15. YI (di) Gemore / Gmore דאָמэр (דמאָרו) ‘the Talmud; the Gemara, i.e. the second part of the Talmud, providing a rabbinical commentary on the first part called Mishna(h)’ (15:11:2)
EN Talmud, ES guemore + note, PL Gemara, RU Talmud תלמיד + note
DE Text, FR omitted
JA Tarumūdo タルムード ‘the Talmud (< Hebrew Talmud תַלְמָד)’ + note
Before the analysis proper of this material, a simple quantitative summary appears to be in order. It covers all the equivalents listed above, and as sometimes more than one counterpart is used by the translators for the same Yiddish word, the total for each language exceeds fifteen, i.e. the number of the items on the list.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Yiddish-/Hebrew-derived</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The words derived from Yiddish or Hebrew are usually adapted to the borrowing language – phonetically and of course orthographically, but sometimes morphologically as well (cf. 5-DE Rabbiner, ES rabino, PL rabin, RU ravvin); they mainly constitute terms of long and established tradition in Europe. Only exceptionally are they provided with some additional, explanatory element (6-RU naš rabbi-pravednik ‘our Rabbi – the righteous one’, 10-DE Passahfest).

The “other devices” by contrast are only partly traditional words related to Judaism (e.g. 3-DE Bundeslade, 4-PL rodal ‘a parchment scroll of the Torah’, 10-EN Passover), and they further include ad hoc coinages or descriptive phrases introduced by the translators (2-DE Thora-Pult, 3-RU škaf dlja svitkov ‘cupboard for scrolls’, 13-FR école talmudique). Another group here are words less precise than in the original, such of a wider – sometimes much wider – meaning, which makes them acceptable as contextual equivalents only, but not as lexical ones (e.g. 2-FR tribune, 12-DE Schule, FR étude, 15-DE Text; also 2-RU altar’ ‘altar’, rather questionable as a counterpart for ‘bema’). This last device (approximate equivalents) appears in combination with the previous one (elaborate ad hoc phrases), the latter being used at the first occurrence only and later on in the text replaced by the shortened variant (8-ES bedel de la sinagoga || bedel).

And now for the Japanese translation. Asukai and Hosomi made use of each and every one of these methods while rendering the discussed Yiddish words in their version: borrowings from Hebrew (5/6-JA rabi, 15-JA Tarumúdo), established
Japanese equivalents of other origin (1-JA shinagōgu, 3-JA seihitsu), ad hoc coinages (12-JA Yudaya gakkō), approximate equivalents (7-JA -san, 8-JA dōmori), full names and their shortened variants (10-JA Sugikoshi no Matsuri / matsuri, 13-JA Yudaya shingakkō / shingakkō). However, there is one more means utilized in this translation, absolutely impossible to employ in the European languages (or any other language, for that matter). It consists in using the reading aid, called furigana 振り仮名 or rubi ルビ, i.e. syllabic characters placed beside or above Chinese characters, whose principal task is to give a phonetic transcription of words with a difficult or unusual reading. Complicated as the Japanese writing system is, this furigana – contrary to its original purpose – is sometimes used for indicating a reading at variance with the one following from the Chinese characters. In this way the Chinese characters convey the meaning of the word, but their reading is to be ignored and replaced by the one given in the furigana.12 The Japanese translators fall back on this trick in as many as three cases out of the fifteen listed above: in 9-JA Shokuzai no Hi ⟨Yomu Kipūru⟩ 賢罪の日 the characters 賢罪の日 clarify the meaning ‘Day of Atonement’, but their usual pronunciation Shokuzai no Hi is to be replaced with ヨム・キプール, i.e. Yomu Kipūru; so also in 13-JA Yudaya shingakkō ⟨yeshiva⟩ ユダヤ神学校 ‘Jewish seminary’ and 14-JA kitōsho ⟨beto midorashu⟩ 祈祷所 ‘prayer room, chapel’. The only instance that remotely resembles this Japanese device can be found in the German version, when a borrowing from Hebrew is directly followed by its native equivalent: “Ach Warschau, Stadt der Juden, ein Gewimmel war das einstmals, Jom Kippur | Ein endloses Versöhnungsfest mit Beten, Streiten, Handeln in der Synagog” (6:2:1–2; cf. 9-DE above), although a repetition of this kind may very well be just a poetic devise as Biermann’s translation is rather free and tending towards a loose adaptation (its altered overtones as compared with the original are emphasized by Sitarz and Pawelec 2015: 41–43).

As can be seen, the translation techniques of Asukai and Hosomi are not much different from those found in the European versions – it is only the frequency of the individual methods that is disparate. The contrast is especially striking when Japanese is compared with Polish or Russian, but the fact itself that the Japanese translation ranks at the very bottom of the table above is indeed telling. This is undoubtedly related to the various degree to which Jewish terminology has been established in the particular languages, although it must be stressed that the data collected in the present paper refer to the analyzed translations, and not to the languages in their entirety.

12 The result is somewhat similar to the Latin-derived abbreviations in English, such as e.g. = for example or viz. = namely, where the writing is one thing and the reading is another.
There is also another aspect to the way in which words reflecting the culture, religion and everyday life of the Yiddish speakers are expressed in translations. After the mass murder of Jews during the Second World War, after their disappearance from most cities and towns of Europe, long-established terms in question have gradually been falling into disuse. Thus, for instance, of the fourteen Yiddish- and Hebrew-derived words present in the Polish translation by Ficowski some three quarters are no more commonly understood nowadays, even though they can be found in many a modern dictionary. In such a situation the employment of transparent – even if less accurate – expressions or phrases makes the translated text more easily accessible to the average contemporary reader, saving them the necessity of studying footnotes or consulting a dictionary. This comfort can be enjoyed by the Japanese public, while the Polish or, say, Russian version of Dos lid... is more demanding. To put it another way, the Japanese notes can be read, the Polish ones – must. (The issue here is not to claim the superiority of one strategy over the other, but merely to state this marked difference resulting from disparate history and culture of Central and Eastern Europe on the one hand and East Asia on the other, a difference which is worthy of a separate description from a sociolinguistic perspective.) This striving for intelligibility coupled with the aforementioned literalness can be called the two main features of Asukai and Hosomi’s Japanese translation of “The song of the murdered Jewish people” by Yitskhok Katsenelson.

References

GFHA = Ghetto Fighters’ House Archives [available at: infocenters.co.il/gfh/search.asp?lang=ENG].


