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YIDDISH LITERATURE
IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Books Published 1945—1967

Compiled by

DINA ABRAMOWICZ

Librarian, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research



1967

YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH

1048 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10028

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INTRODUCTION

The following list was compiled with the purpose of surveying what is available in the field of translations from Yiddish into English at the present. The year 1945 was chosen as a starting date rather arbitrarily on the assumption that books published since the end of World War II are still in print. However, a comparison between the output of translations before and after 1945 seems to point to some new developments which took place in the field in the past two decades. Here are a few observations which the compiler offers as a preliminary step to further investigation.

The first and rather unexpected fact is the considerable increase in the total output. While in the half century before 1945 the number of translations in book form was eighty*, the number of items in the present list exceeds two hundred, which shows that the figure more than doubled in less than half the time.

Another, more subtle, but nevertheless distinct change is the shift of emphasis in the selection of materials for translation. The historic start was made more than six decades ago when Leo Wiener of Harvard, impressed by the eloquence with which Morris Rosenfeld described the plight of the Jewish immigrant in the sweat-shops of the New World, translated his Yiddish verse into English prose. After this first attempt, and apparently not connected with it in any sense, other translations followed, spurred by the cultural interests and needs of the Jewish immigrant population and their descendants. The popularity of the Yiddish theater which flourished on American soil during the first quarter of this century was responsible for translations from Yiddish playwrights such as S. An-ski, D. Pinski,

* According to the compiler's estimate.

Perets Hirshbeyn (Peretz Hirshbein) and Y.Y. Zinger (I.J. Singer)*. The nostalgic memories of childhood and youth of generations still close to their East European origins spurred translations of memoirs and descriptions of life in the shtetl in the Old Country. Among these translated, successful writers of the pre-war era figured prominently, with Sholem Asch leading, followed by Zalmen Shneur (Zalmen Shneour), Y.Y. Zinger and a few others. The classics of Yiddish literature were represented by a very modest number: one anthology, two publications each for Sholom Aleichem and Peretz, and one for Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendele Mocher Seforim). Three of these publications were put out by the Jewish Publication Society of America.

The situation seems to reverse itself after 1945. Among individual authors, Sholom Aleichem is at the top of the list with 18 items** (14 translations and 4 adaptations), Y.L. Peretz follows with 13 (9 translations and 4 adaptations), and the figure for Mendele Moykher Sforim has gone up from 1 to 4. This success of the "Founding Fathers" of Yiddish literature seems to indicate the emergence of a genuine interest in Yiddish literature, an awareness of its lasting values and a sense of responsibility for conveying these values to an audience that does not read Yiddish. It is worth noting that the interest in the classics proved stronger than their reputation of being very difficult, if not impossible, to translate. The most formidable of the three was considered to be Sholom Aleichem, with his humor based on the play of words and meanings. So much so, that

* See note on p.10 on transcription of the last names of Yiddish authors.

** One cannot fail to notice that most of the Sholom Aleichem items are various editions of the same material; this, however, could be indicative of lack of available new translations rather than lack of interest or demand.

even so experienced a translator as Maurice Samuel thought it advisable to give a presentation of the world of Sholom Aleichem and Peretz rather than a straight translation. But his effort seems to have shown the way and "straight" translations followed. Incidentally, the question of Sholom Aleichem's "translatability" was discussed in a Columbia University master's thesis "Sholem Aleichem's humor in English translation" (M.A., Columbia University, 1955). Its author, Roda S. Kachuk, reached the conclusion that a positive result was attainable.

Another achievement of the last two decades has been the extension of translations to new areas, mainly to studies in the social sciences and humanities conducted in Yiddish primarily by YIVO during the four decades of its existence. Since the early forties, when YIVO established its permanent headquarters in the United States, 13 volumes of its YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science have appeared, as well as several monographs, thus making available to the English reader some of the research published in the many volumes of its Yiddish language publications since its inception in 1925.

Another area of progress is the field of Yiddish folklore. Although English collections of Jewish humor, mostly anecdotes and jokes of Yiddish origin, have been popular for quite some time, the Yiddish folk song and folk tale have been practically unknown. The situation has now changed for the better, as can be seen from the number of entries under folklore in the subject index to our list.*

An entirely new branch of Yiddish literature which emerged from the years 1939-1945 and is known in Yiddish as khurbn-literatur, i.e.

* The achievement in this area is even more impressive when one also considers research papers dealing with Yiddish folklore materials recently published in the Field of Yiddish, v.1, 2, New York, 1954, The Hague, 1965, and For Max Weinreich, The Hague, 1964.

literature of the holocaust, also found its reflection, however, pale in English translation. The significance of this literature lies chiefly in the fact that it brings first-hand documentary material of the period, such as diaries of victims of German persecution written in ghettos and concentration camps, eye-witness accounts of survivors, memoirs and accounts of participants and leaders of resistance movements and the like. The existing translations may be considered the first steps towards making available in English material of very great significance for research about Jews and for the field of social and behavioral sciences in general.

Alongside the increased number of translations, the shift of interest toward the classics and the expansion into new fields, there emerged a noticeable trend toward a more scholarly approach to the whole field of translations from Yiddish. The interest of writers of national prominence, as well as of highly competent, academically-trained people in the field resulted in considerable achievements. A few high level anthologies were published which endeavored to provide not only a representative selection of the material, but also supplied introductory essays on Yiddish literature for the serious student as well as for the intellectually inclined layman. In a number of instances, the translators were chosen much more carefully. In several instances the text, either in its original Yiddish script or in English transcription, was provided parallel with the English translation giving the reader the possibility to compare and evaluate the quality of the translation if he was able and willing to do so.

Dr. Shlomo Noble of the YIVO, who surveyed the field of translations from Yiddish in 1948*, pointed out that there was a need for greater

* "Modern Yiddish literature in English translation," Jewish book annual v.7, p. 67-74, New York, 1948.

diversity in the field of translations and that the most neglected areas were the classics and pre-classical literature on one side and modern poetry and essays on the other. As our observations seem to indicate, considerable progress has been achieved since then with respect to the number of translations, and a conscious effort has been made to raise the standards of the work done. However, an adequate coverage is still far from being achieved and some areas remain untouched. Let us point, for instance, to the works of the younger generation of Yiddish writers active in Poland between the two world wars (M. Burshteyn, Sh. Horontshik, Z. Segalovitsh, A. Katsizne, Leyb Rashkin and others), Soviet Yiddish literature (including such names as Dovid Bergelson, Der Nister, Dovid Hofshiteyn and Perets Markish), and contemporary Yiddish letters flourishing in various centers of Jewish life, especially in the Americas and Israel. May we also add that, although a trend toward raising the standards of the translation output has been noted above, the problem of linguistic and literary quality of the translations, no less important than the extent of the coverage, deserves much closer attention than it has received until now on the part of those active in the field.

In the preceding remarks no attempt has been made to probe the sociological and cultural factors involved. It is clear, however, that developments in the field of translations depend on the general interest and attitude of the Jewish community in the English speaking countries toward the cultural heritage of that large segment of the Jewish people whose language has been Yiddish, and on the recognition on the part of the intellectual community of the lasting and universal values embodied in Yiddish literature, values which entitle it to occupy a place of its own in the treasure house of world literature. In a recent study on the status of