

POLISH-RUSSIAN ELEMENTS IN YIDDISH

By Joseph Witriol

Writing in 1914, the Russian-Jewish litterateur I. H. Taviov stated that in the Yiddish speech of the "average baal bayiss" he had found about 500 nouns common to Polish and Russian, 300 Polish nouns with no Russian equivalents and 400 Russian nouns with no Polish equivalents, as well as about 200 verbs, mostly Polish or common to Polish and Russian, and about 100 Polish or Russian adjectives and particles.²

x Taviov was an anti-Yiddishist whose polemical bias, however, does not detract from the value of his studies of spoken Yiddish. He stresses that it is the spoken language which he has investigated. He holds with Luther that it is the spoken tongue of the market place, not the written "literary" language, which is authentic. He is not deceived by the ~~teitschmerishx~~ teitchmerish - Germanising - Yiddish of the newspapers.

² I. H. Taviov, 'Ha-yesodot ha-slaviim ba-zhargon', Ha-shiloah, vol. xxx, no. 2, p.139. Reprinted in Kitvei I. H. Taviov (Berlin, 1923).

Following Tavirov in this respect I record here no Yiddish words which I have not actually heard in Yiddish speech, mostly my mother's, in this country. Incidentally, I transcribe the Polish, southern "o" dialect spoken by my mother and her landsleit; Litvacks will please make the necessary adjustments. ² Many words listed by Tavirov are not known to me from spoken Yiddish. This is not to deny their authenticity, of course. I am merely concerned here to indicate briefly those appreciable Polish-Russian elements in the Yiddish spoken by Jews outside eastern Europe which are part of my own active Yiddish vocabulary.

Often, says Tavirov, the intimate contact that existed between Jew and non-Jew in Poland, in contrast to the greater seclusion of the Jews in the ghettos of Germany, facilitated a "take-over" of Polish by Yiddish. Thus the Yiddish words for some family

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In the transcription kh represents the ch in Scottish and German Loch, u the vowel in English nut, final a the ^{obscure} "uh" sound ^{of} the final ^{vowel} syllable of English drama. For typographical reasons I have had to omit accents from Polish words.

relationships, for example, may be ascribed to the Polish "nanas" employed in Jewish households: tutta "daddy" (P. tata); zeyda "grandfather" (P. dziad); boobba "grandmother" (P. baba).

Although the German words for the main foodstuffs were retained in Yiddish, Jewish women, less conservative than men and more prone to gossip - hence more likely to hear and to use new words - were responsible for introducing smettenn (P. smietana "cream" - but for us ~~smietana~~ smettena was specifically milk left to curdle in glasses in summer, the "cream" forming on top); kusha "pearl barley" (P. kasza perlowa); boobess "potatoes" (P. bulwa from Latin bulbus).

The necessities of daily intercourse would account for words like koimen "chimney" (P. komin, cf. G. Kamin); zeygger "clock" (P. zegar, cf. G. Zeiger, which in Middle High German meant "clock" as well as "clock-hand" - German words form an appreciable portion of the Polish vocabulary); futcheyla "head-scarf," stated by Tavirov to come from an old Polish word facelet, cf. Italian fazzolo; blootta "mud" (P. bloto); trimna "coffin" (P. trumna); shmuta "rag" (P. szmata); shpilka "pin" (P. szpilka - sitzen off shpilkess "to be on tenterhooks"); pishka "box" (P. puszka); gutkas "underpants" (P.); shleykess "braces" (P. szelki); keshena "pocket" (P. kieszzen). Of adjectives and particles: prosst "simple" (P. prosty), zurss "immediately" (P. zaraz); khotch "although,"

at least" (P. choe); uz, the relative conjunction "that" (P. az); ubee "provided that, so long as" - ubee gezinnt "so long as you have your health and strength" (P. aby). In the health, or rather ill-health, department we find: prish "pimple" (P. pryszcz); kulika "cripple" (P. kaleka) and the famous bunkess "cupping-glasses" (P. banka) - helfen azoi vee u toiten bankess "to be as much help as leeches to a corpse."

Daily intercourse also provided a vocabulary of vituperation: purkh "rotter" (P. parch "scab"); puskidnik, more or less synonymous with the preceding (P. paskudnik "sloven" lobbess "rogue" - but often a term of endearment when used by a doting grandparent (P. lobuz); pisk "mouth" pejoratively (P. pysk "muzzle"). Yiddish mohl is the normal word for mouth, though in German Maul, when not pejorative, is used only of animals).

Some Slav words were consciously preferred to their German equivalents, as Tavirov points out, because of their greater concision or lack of ambiguity. Shpilka is less of a mouthful than G. Stecknadel for "pin"; shleykess and gutkess less ponderous than the German "trouser-bearers" and "under-trousers" (Hosentraeger, Unterhosen) respectively.

Although G. Fiedel was retained, the strings of the fiddle became strinness (P. strána), as G. Saite could be ~~xxxx~~ confused with its homonym Seite "side," and the bow of the fiddle became smitchik (P. smyczek), eliminating the ambiguity

of G. Bogen meaning both "bow and "arch" (Fiedelbogen is unambiguous but long-winded). Polish az displaced German dass, the relative conjunction "that" which is indistinguishable in sound from the definite article das.

Polish-Russian verbs were Germanised in Yiddish. Herex again, remarks Tavioy, the Polish or Russian verb was often chosen because there was no completely equivalent single word in German. Thus for Yiddish horreven (P. harowac "to labour, drudge") there is no single German word conveying the same idea of "hard ~~labour~~ labour," and Yiddish hoddeven "to bring up (children)" from P. hodowac "to rear (animals)" has overtones of solicitude which cannot be rendered by any single German verb. Khroppen "to snore," khlopen "to splash" and khlippen "to sob" are splendidly onomatopoeic (P. chrapac, chlapac and chlipac). There is no exact equivalent in German of Y. zhuleven "to be sparing of" (P. zalowac). For Y. strushenen (P. straszye) there is G. einschuechtern but, as Tavioy observes, this word is a comparative newcomer to the language. Khupen (P. chupac "to snatch") is a maid-of-all-work: u metseea khupen "to get a bargain," u aximixabiml driml khupen "to snatch forty winks," khup nisht "don't grab!" Ruteven "to rescue" is from P. ratowac, itself from G. retten. Praven "to perform" - praven dem seyder "to perform the Seder service" - from R. pravit was probably introduced into Yiddish by the

Chasidim. Nidden (P. nudzic) "to bore" is in Yiddish "to bore" plus - to get on someone's nerves, drive up the wall.

Yiddish formed many compound verbs consisting of German prefix plus Polish-Russian simple verb, e.g. zekh arhss (G. heraus) khupen "to blurt out," tsee (G. zu) shpillen "to button (sic) up." Often a Polish, or Russian prefix was "translated" into Yiddish and combined with a German verb to form a Yiddish compound verb which in German itself is expressed differently. For instance, the Polish and Russian "intensive" prefix na- was translated by oon- (G. an-) and used to form Yiddish verbs of the the kind zekh oonessen, oontrinken "to eat, drink one's fill" (G. sich satt essen, trinken).

Zekh zeygnen "to say goodbye" means literally "to make the sign of the cross;" The Jews in medieval Germany carefully avoided G. segnen "to bless" - the word is derived from Latin signum "sign (of the cross)" - and used bentchen from MHG. benedien (derived from L. benedicere) instead, but the Jews in Poland pressed on with the etymologically identical zegnac sie "to cross oneself in saying goodbye" regardless. Taviov's irony in quoting this as an example of the "genuine Jewishness" of Yiddish is not altogether surprising.

Indeed, as Tavirov points out, many of the "typically Yiddish" locutions are simply Polish, not excluding the time-hall Shu! of the shames (P. Sza!), while Y. tuka "indeed" is P. tak "yes," and the Yiddish enclitic zhe expressing emphasis is Polish (ze) too (Zoog zhe nokh umool inn tuka nokh umool - "Say again and yet again.") Likewise Polish is the Y. interjection ot "there!" Tavirov derives nebbekh from P. nieboga "wretch" though the alternative derivation from nit bei eikh "(may it) not (happen) with you" seems equally plausible.

The diminutive -inke added to Yiddish adjectives - gittinke, sheyninke, teirinke, shtillinke (G. gut, schoen, teur, still "good," "fine," "dear," "quiet") - is conceded even by Tavirov to confer a neshama yetera, an "extra soul" on Yiddish. (German has diminutive forms for nouns - Haeuschen, Roeslein, etc. - but not for adjectives. The Yiddish adjectival diminutive is a borrowing from Russian.)

The Polish suffix -nik "fellow" (nudnik "a fellow who nuds or bores, a bore") was welcomed into the Yiddish fold. Nudnik was taken direct into Yiddish, nidnik. Fidnik, a Ph.D. nidnik, is, of course, an Anglo-Yiddishism. Schlimm (G. "bad") mazzal (H. "luck") -nik gives Y. shlimuzulnik, the chap who spills his soup on the waiter's trousers. In the persons of the kibbutznik and the beatnik it would seem that Yiddish old -nik has broken Hebrew and English sound barriers respectively.