Confusion of Languages in Steve Stem-Sandberg *The Emperor of Lies*

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For novelistic reconstruction, nothing is more important than the choice of language. Case in point: the Yiddish-flavored Polish in *Voices in the Dark* and *The Inn* by Julian Stryjkowski or in *Bread for the Departed* by Bogdan Wojdowski, as well as the French in *War and Peace*. For this reason, Steve Sem-Sandberg applies German and Yiddish in his *Emperor of Lies*. But linguistic devices that are supposed to confirm authenticity of the narration may sometimes undermine it. As in *Fateless*, the famous novel by Imre Kertesz, where an alleged Pole by the Russian diminutive *Pjetyka* (pron: Piet'ka) greets his fellow inmates every morning with a non-existing Polish greeting ‘Dobre rano’ (Northwestern University Press, 1992, pp. 150-152). In Sem-Sandberg’s novel, German sentences serve the purpose, while the omnipresent Yiddish insertions do the opposite.

In Polish-Lithuanian lands, Yiddish had at least four major dialects: central Polish, Galitzianer, Litvak and Volliner (Volynian). The latter - an intermediate between Litvak and the other three - was chosen by Ida Kamińska for her Jewish theater in postwar Poland. A literary standard established at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and based mainly (though not entirely) on the Litvak dialect, was used only in schools, at aspiring cultural events and on the stage in the Vilna region and in the Soviet Union. Writers usually remained faithful to the speech of their mothers. In accordance with the established standard, I. L. Perec - the leading poet, classic, and one of the reformers - should write:

*Monish iz a finer yung / r’hot a kepl fier flink*

but he obviously intended here a rhyme in his native dialect:

*Monish iz a finer ying / r’hot a kepl fier flink*

Derived from German, Yiddish reduced the German vowels: ‘a’ to ‘o’, ‘o’ to ‘u’, ‘u’ to ‘i’. A German *was ist das* sounded *vos is dos* in Vilna, and *vus is dus* in Warsaw or Łódź. Yiddish speakers in central Poland, Galicia and Volynia like the Germans prolonged accented ‘e’ in such words as: *deym, tseyn, geybn, leybn*, which in Lithuania and Belarus were pronounced: *dem, tsen, gebn, lebn*. Most Yiddish speakers pronounced *ein, zwei, kein* (*ayn, tsvey, keyn*) like the Germans, while the Litvaks: *yn, tsvey, keyn*. The well-known anthem of Jewish partisans begins with the line: *Zog nish kaynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg*, because it was written by a partisan from Vilna, but at postwar ceremonies in Łódź, it was sung: *Zug nisht kaynmul az di gayst deym letstn veyg*. By the way, there is a slight problem with its music, which was previously a marching song of the Cossacks (its original faster tempo has an obvious beat of riding cavalry), who historically were second only to the SS in murdering defenseless Jews.

The Swedish author of the novel on the Łódź Ghetto, confuses and mixes Yiddish dialects. *A ratsie is du* (p. 69), transliterated in the English edition as *A ratsye iz du* (p. 66), and *A baize riekh* (p. 98), transliterated in English as *A baize riekh* (p. 96) both sound like Lodzer speech, but *hot nisht kejn moire*. *S’s gut!* (p. 499), in English transliteration *hot niszt keyn moyre. S’z gut!* (p.499) is unjustifiably Litvak. *Mir muzn

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avek, di kumt shoin! (Sw. 547, Eng. 545) is half Litvak and half hard-to-guess what. Only a Litvak would say S’iz gut – dos veis ich shoin (Sw. 223, Eng. 221; in Lodzer Yiddish, it would sound: S’iz git – dus vays yech shoyn. In another Litvak sentence: Baledik nisht dem eibershtn, er vet dir shlogn tsu der erd! (Sw. 499), the word eibershtn (eybershtn in English transliteration) is an extreme Litvak manner of where even ‘oy’ becomes ‘ey’. In Lodzer Yiddish the sentence would sound: Baleydk niszt deym oybershtn, er vet dir shlugn tsi der erd!

During the deportation of ‘unproductive’ young children, Sem-Sandberg’s Jews protest in a distorted Litvak dialect: Gajt (sic) avek ajere nachesn, mir veln undzere kinder niszt opgebn (267). The English edition has faithfully transliterated it with the nonsensical word Gayt (265). Authentic Lodzer Jews would shout: Git avek ayere nachesn, mir veln indzere nisht upgeybn. Also the Jewish police in Sem-Sandberg’s Łódź Ghetto yell like Litvaks: Ir parazitn, vos hobn gelebt fun undz ale teg, itst iz tsajt tsi grobn in dem shais! Rirt zich ad (sic) di polkes, ir chazeirim! (448); the English edition not only replicated this Livak version but even corrected the non-Yiddish ad to a typically Litvak ‘af’ (p. 448-449). Actual Jewish policemen in the Łódź Ghetto would yell: Ir parazitn, vus hubn gelebyt fin indz ale teyg, yetst iz di tsajt tsi grubn in deym szays! Rirt di pulkes, khazeyrim! By the way, the Hebraism chazeirim (Eng. transliteration khazyrim) which means swine or pigs was euphemized in the English version as ‘layabouts’ with no explanation why. In some sentences the Swedish author drops in to his Yiddish unauthorized German words: man zol es (Sw. 346) instead of men zol es, or der arbaiter (Sw. 542) - the latter copied in the English edition (541) - instead of der arbeiter;

Following is a song in mixed dialects:
S’iz keidanken keitn,
S’iz gite tsaitn
Kainer tit zikh haint nisht shemen
Jeder vil du haint nor nemen;
Abi tsi zain tsu zat (Sw. 30)

This text is even more confusing in the English edition:
S’iz keyn danken (sic) keytn
S’iz gite tsaytn
Kayner tit zikh haynt nisht shemen;
Yeder vil du haynt nor nemen
Abi tsi zayn tsu zat (27/28),

In both editions, the Lodzer tsi is next to the Litvak tsu (which by the way is superfluous) and the Polonism keidanken (corr. kaydanken) meaning hand-cuffs has been ‘translated’ as keyn danken, which means „not thanking” and makes no sense at all.

Litvak verses: Vos zainen mir – a flig? / (...) / Oi, es zol shoin zain genuk (Sw. 166), transliterated in the English edition as Vos zaynem mir – a flig? / (...) / Oy, es zol shoyn zain genuk (sic 165) would have their obviously intended rhyme in its actual Lodzer Yiddish: Vus zaynen mir – a flig? / (...) / Oy, es zol shoyn zayn genig. The same refers to further lines: Kinder fun (sic) der vig / (...) / Oy, es zol shoyn zayn genig (Sw. 173), where the English edition corrected fun der vig to in der vig, but distorted genig as genuk (171).
Other Litvak verses in the same song: *Tsevorfn, jedes bazunder / Fun kjasanim (sic) kales / Fun muters – kleine kinder* (Sw. 173) would also have the intended rhyme in Łódźer pronunciation: *Tsevorfn, yedes bazinder / Fin khasunim – klayne kinder*. Besides, *kjasanim (khasanim in the English transliteration)* is a Hebrew form, which Litvaks would pronounce *khasonim*, and the others *khasunim*. The English edition replicates the erroneous *khasanim* (171).

There is a song with a distorted Litvak sound:

*Unglik* (sic), *shrek un moires*
*Mir veisn nit fun vanen*
*Oich haint vi in ale doiren* (sic)
*Zainen mir oisgeshtanen!* (Sw. 165)

In English edition, *unglik* has been corrected to *umglik* and *doiren* to *dojres* (165), but it remains not a Łódźer song.

On the other hand, there are lines in distorted Łódźer speech:

*Er zugt indz tsi tsi geibn* (sic)
*Man* (sic) *zol es nor darleibn* (sic Sw. 346).

The English edition has corrected the second line: *Men zol es nor derleybn* (346), but not the first, where *tsigeybn* should be one words. Amazingly, in a Polish edition, all those lines are „translated” to Litvak dialect, with the exception of the last word *derleybn*, which therefore does not rhyme with the Litvak *tsugebn* (Pol. 327-328).²

It is quite possible that children were instructed by their teachers to sing some of the above songs in the near-Litvak school standard. But not uncontrolled street songs, such as one addressed to the woman in charge of the Ghetto soup. In the Swedish edition, it is intended to have its Lodzer sound:

*Pani vidzelatske* (sic): *Ich main niszt kain gelekhter*
*Abisele tifer, a bisele gedekhter* (416),

which is replicated in the English edition:

*Pani vidzelatske* (sic): *Ich mayn niszt gelekhter*
*A bisele tifer, a bisele gedakhter* (416).

But when I heard it right after the war from the Jewish boys in Łódź, it had the full sound of Lodzer Jewish street:

*Pani vidgelatchko, kh ‘mayn niszt ka gelakhter*
*A bisele tifer, a bisl gedakhter*

*Pani wydzielaczko* are Polish words. The ‘o’ ending indicated a Polish vocative, but in this case it is also a Lodzer mannerism pronouncing final ‘e’ as ‘o’ (*di mame* instead of *di mame, der tato* instead of *der tate*). The *ka* was a slang deviation from *kayn*, and *gelakhter* and *gedakhter* from *gelekhter* and *gedichter* or *gedekhter*. Both *bysele* and *bysl* are correct but two times *bisele* disturbs the rhythm. And again, the Polish edition has mercilessly litvaked even this so original folklore of the Łódź Ghetto.

There are also some semantic misunderstandings. If ‘at the start of 1944, he had just turned forty,’ why parents of the Coupon Inspector, Chaim Widawski, are described as ‘the young man’s terrified parents’ (Eng. 536 and 547, Sw. 537 and 549),’ and why his fellow workers ‘have not seen young Mr. Coupon Inspector for a few days’(ibid)? During

² *Biedni ludzie z miasta Łodzi*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2011.
World War II – which I remember well – people matured and aged earlier than ever, especially in such places as the Łódź Ghetto. For unexplained reasons, the Jewish police, which served the Germans, demand from a prisoner not only: ‘Give us the names of those Bolsheviks’, but also of ‘those murdering German lackeys’ (Eng. 502, Sw. 502). Another doubt: does the author fully understand the reality of the Łódź Ghetto, if he suggests that when Hans Biebow stood alone among Jewish hay-makers with scythes, ‘somebody could easily have got rid of the highest representative of the tyrannical power that made their lives a daily hell’ (Eng. 439, Sw. 439). Biebow, the German in charge of the Ghetto, was hanged after the war in the Ghetto’s main square (some grown-ups from our Children Home in Helenówek went to see it), but he had tried to maintain his empire for as long as possible, not unlike his Jewish partner, Chaim Rumkowski. Were it not for their ambition and collaboration, the Ghetto would have been annihilated back in 1942 along with most of the other ghettos.

Sem-Sandberg seems to seek fresh means of expression in expressionism, the style fashionable in Germany in the years 1910-25 and for some time in post-revolutionary Russia. Hence ‘the great Chaim went about in his lie like an emperor in his palace’ (Eng. 230, Sw. 232). But also a voice ‘like a dangling noose as it spat out its who are you?’ (Eng. 225, Sw. 227); or ‘the sky hanging as taut and blue-glistening as a cow’s udder over the dustbowl streets’ (Eng. 444, Sw. 444). By the way, the English title ‘Emperor of Lies’ seems more appropriate than the original ‘De fattiga i Łódź’ meaning ‘Poor People in Łódź,’ because the novel pays much more attention to Rumkowski, his collaborators, and other pathological types than to the most deprived inmates of the Ghetto turned into a slave-labor camp. Perhaps the expressionism of the First World War is suitable also for the no less drastic Second World War, and perhaps the horrors depicted by Sem-Sandberg justify his style, but not necessarily his meddling in sensational pathologies of sex and violence, and infringing on privacy of such victims as the still alive adopted son of Rumkowski, too old now, too tired and too disgusted for suing over the circumstances of his ‘sensational’ childhood.

Topographical details of the Ghetto seem scrupulous and accurate, as do the dates and events based on chronicles and memoirs. But they all miss the point if its language, the main flavor and colour, is false. Especially since the topography and other details have long been established and preserved, while the language of the annihilated culture vanishes and perishes in oblivion. Incidentally, there are some topographical inaccuracies as well. The Children Home in Helenówek (I stayed there in the years 1946-49) was located north-west of the city’s northern parts that had been enclosed as the Ghetto. Why then in the novel Rumkowski drives with the Children Home from Helenówek ‘past the ruins of the Temple Synagogue in Kościuszko Street’ (Eng. 52, Sw. 54/55), the elegant avenue which ran a couple of kilometers south of the Ghetto. I also doubt that the cramped Ghetto had such spacious hall which ‘thousands of Łódź Jews’ could fill ‘to the last standing space’ (Eng. 102, Sw. 104). Other minor errors: the Soviet Army aka Red Army was never called ‘the Russian People’s Army’ (Eng. 209. Sw. 211), and the counter-offensive after Stalingrad was not led by some ‘General Zjukov’ - same spelling in Swedish (538) and English (537) - but by Marshall Zhukov, a major actor in that war’s theater whose name and title should not be misspelled.
Sem-Sandberg’s story of the Łódź Ghetto is pessimistic, as it should be. But one of the saddest conclusions I take away from it is that the annihilation of the language of the annihilated goes on.