

Vivian Felsen

A Translator's Reflections

Early in 2015, the Azrieli Foundation entrusted me with the translation of *Fun Natsishen Yomertol*¹ by Rabbi Pinchas Hirschprung. This assignment afforded me the possibility of spending a year with a renowned Torah scholar who could guide me through the fundamental sources of Judaism and Hasidism, revealing their relevance to his own thoughts and experiences with astounding candour. Not only did this book introduce me to the Eastern European rabbinical world, it underscored for me the profoundly rich, complex and multidimensional nature of Yiddish culture, and of the Yiddish language itself. It ultimately led me to look back on my own journey as a Yiddish translator, and how I had reached the point where I could even contemplate undertaking a translation such as this. I would like to share those personal reflections.

For me, translating Yiddish has been a series of surprises and coincidences, including the very fact that I ever became a Yiddish translator. About 20 years ago, when I was working as a freelance translator of French into English, I was unexpectedly presented with the opportunity of translating a book published in Yiddish five decades earlier. Entitled *Montreal fun Nekhtn* (Montreal of Yesterday)² it had been written by my maternal grandfather, Montreal journalist and author Israel Medres. The Yiddish writing I have translated subsequently, ranging from Holocaust memoirs to short stories by women authors, has broadened my horizons, opened new perspectives, and provided fresh insights.³ However, translating Rabbi Hirschprung's book opened up a whole new world, and I would like to explain why.

When the Azrieli Foundation asked me to translate Rabbi Hirschprung's book, I realized immediately from the quality of the writing and when it was written – at a time when the Jews of Europe were still being rounded up and slaughtered – that this was no ordinary book, that it was an historically significant work, and that it must be one of the earliest Holocaust memoirs in existence. I found it difficult to believe that it had never before been translated into English.

From the moment I opened the book, I felt a strong personal connection. The publisher, the Eagle Publishing Company, was also the publisher of the Montreal Yiddish daily, the *Keneder Adler*, where my grandfather had been a staff writer and editor for over 40 years. My grandfather, in his book *Tsvishn Tsvey Velt Milkhomes*, had written about the group of scholars – heads of yeshivas and their students – who arrived in Canada in 1941. “No one,” he wrote, “imagined at that time that this group would spawn two large yeshivas in Montreal...which would significantly enrich Jewish religious life and Jewish education”⁴. Although my grandfather did not specifically mention Rabbi Hirschprung, he certainly must have known him well.

I also felt a strong connection with my father's family. My paternal grandfather, Samuel Solomon Glass, was a devout and learned Jew from Słupia Nowa, Poland, who had received *smikha* at the age of 18 and spent his days at study and prayer. Known as

a Talmud scholar, he was consulted on matters of *halakha* by Rabbi Abraham Price, the leading Orthodox rabbi in Toronto. I used to go with my father to bring my grandfather home from the *Chevre Shas* in Toronto, where all the other men, with their patriarchal beards and black coats, looked just like him. As soon as I began leafing through Rabbi Hirschprung's book, I saw that its publication had been sponsored by members of the Adath Yeshurun Synagogue which was affiliated with the *Chevre Shas* in Montreal. My paternal grandfather would certainly have known about Rabbi Hirschprung, and perhaps even have met him. The book also made me recall that my grandfather had taken the difficult decision to come to Canada with his family in 1930 only after consulting the Suchedniów *rebbe*. My father credited two people with saving the lives of his immediate family: his aunt in Canada (his mother's sister) who had sponsored them, and the Suchedniów *rebbe*. But who exactly was the Suchedniów *rebbe*? I had never thought to ask. By translating this book, I hoped to learn much more about my grandfather's world in pre-war Poland.

Still, I was filled with trepidation. Not because of the frequent use of Russian, German, Hebrew, and Polish words and phrases in the book – all languages of which I already had a working knowledge. Rather, my anxiety stemmed from the fact that Rabbi Hirschprung's book contained not just words and phrases, but entire sentences, entire passages, and on almost every page, from traditional Jewish texts. And until I began to search them on the Internet, using a Hebrew keyboard, I had no idea of their specific origins. And what a variety of sources they were. They included all the books of the Bible, the Talmud, the liturgy, the Kabbalah and even the writings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. On the other hand, this project had come to me at a time in my life when I had acquired some familiarity with the yeshiva world, ever since my middle son had gone to study at the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, eventually becoming an Orthodox rabbi. Above all, it was this connection that induced me to translate this book.

Searching the Internet in Hebrew, I soon discovered that I could find the Biblical and Talmudic sources, chapter and verse, tractate and folio number. This in turn made it possible to find appropriate existing English translations, if any. More complicated was finding English translations for concepts from Hasidic texts. For example, I visited many Hebrew-language Breslover websites and viewed videos of rabbis delivering discourses in Yiddish, until I finally found an English version of the *Likutei Moharan*.

I included in my translation the sources for each and every quote because they are so integral to Rabbi Hirschprung's writing. They serve a variety of purposes, ranging from explanatory and descriptive, to psychological and emotional, and even as a source of irony and humour. Through these passages Hirschprung was able to evoke the beauty and power of the Hebrew prayers, especially their power to dispel

despondency by enabling the outpouring of emotion. Through these passages, he conveyed the wisdom of the sacred books of Judaism and their role in his decision-making. Through these passages Rabbi Hirschprung demonstrated that his erudition, and his faith, made him a realist who approached every situation with clear-headed logic. They impelled him to action, rather than inaction, to making the difficult choices that took him through Nazi-occupied Poland and Soviet-held territory to the short-lived “independent” Lithuania, Japan, and finally Canada.

The Vale of Tears also contains a vast amount of detailed information which only an eyewitness could provide. More than that, Rabbi Hirschprung, thanks to his legendary photographic memory, could recount entire conversations he had with Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Nazis; debates among Jews about how to save themselves; discussions with Soviet officials about communism; exchanges with rabbis in the towns he passed through on his way to Vilna; encounters with wise Breslover Hasidim who spoke in parables; and his own meditations on kabbalistic concepts such as the *Zadik*, the *Adam Elyon*, and the *Ain Sof*. He could recreate the psychological turmoil unleashed by the Fifth Column in Poland on the eve of the Second World War, or the failure of the Maginot Line in the early months of the war. He could reconstruct in vivid detail entire scenes, such as sleep-deprived Polish prisoners of war being paraded through his shtetl Dukla, barely able to keep their eyes open; crowded train stations where people slept standing up; and a Soviet detention centre which turned out to be the former *Beys Medresh* of the revered Chafetz Chaim.

Research is an integral part of the translation process. In this case, my research often became a poignant reminder of the enormous body of scholarship, both secular and religious, that existed in the Yiddish language, but has fallen into oblivion. For example, I found out more about Rabbi Hirschprung’s rebbe, Rabbi Meir Shapiro and the famous Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva which he founded, from a Yiddish book, which I happened to have on my own bookshelf, more than I could by searching the Internet in English or even Hebrew. This book entitled *Lublin, Shtot fun Toyre, Rabones un Khasides* (Lublin City of Torah, Rabbinical Scholarship, and Hasidism) was written by Rabbi Nachman Shemen. Published in Yiddish in Toronto in 1951, it is a thick hardcover tome of 540 densely printed pages, replete with illustrations, graphs, reproductions, and lengthy endnotes at the conclusion of every chapter, as well as a detailed index at the back. A *shifsbruder* of my father and his family on their voyage to Canada from Poland in 1930, Rabbi Shemen became an important figure in Toronto Jewish history. As far as I know, the many scholarly books he wrote in Yiddish remain untranslated, and unread.

There can be no doubt that the Azrieli Foundation is making a valuable contribution to Holocaust Studies by publishing and widely distributing the testimonies of

Holocaust survivors, including those written in Yiddish. By providing a rare glimpse of the world of Eastern European Orthodox Jewry just prior to and during the early months of the Second World War, Rabbi Hirschprung's book adds a unique perspective. This book, like others in the Azrieli series, also has much to offer the field of Canadian Jewish Studies, as evidenced by the symposium held at Concordia University on November 29, 2016, the proceedings of which are contained in this issue. Yet Rabbi Hirschprung's life in Canada and his many involvements in the Jewish community as rabbi of a congregation, founder of the first Orthodox high school for girls, author of rabbinic texts, member of the Montreal Board of Rabbis, Chief Rabbi of Montreal for almost thirty years, and teacher in the Lubavitch Yeshiva "where he taught the most advanced Torah classes and ordained rabbis for over a quarter of a century"⁵, have yet to be fully explored. The English translation of the *The Vale of Tears* has already resonated strongly in the Orthodox community in both Canada and the United States. It is my hope that it will also spark interest in the secular world about this remarkable Canadian and his community. It has been a privilege for me to have played a part as translator in this process.

Toronto, November 28, 2017.

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The following is largely based on the speech I delivered at the official book launch of *The Vale of Tears* (Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2016), which took place in Montreal on November 29, 2016.

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Israel Medres, *Montreal of Yesterday: Jewish Life in Montreal, 1900-1920* translated into English and edited by Vivian Felsen (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2000). First published by Medres as *Montreal fun Nekhtn* (Montreal: Eagle Publishing Company, Ltd., 1947). Cf. Israel Medres, *Between the Wars: Canadian Jews in Transition* Translated by Vivian Felsen, (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2004). First published by Medres as *Tsvishn Tsvey Velt Milkhomes* (Montreal: Eagle Publishing Company, Ltd., 1964).

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These translations include: Yankl Nirenberg, *Memoirs of the Lodz Ghetto* (Toronto: Lugas Libros, 2003); Michael Kutz, *If by Miracle* (Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2013); Frieda Johles Forman, ed., *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers* (Toronto: Exile Editions, 2013).

4

Israel Medres, *Between the Wars: Canadian Jews in Transition*, 124.

5

Introduction by Zale Newman in Pinchas Hirschprung, *The Vale of Tears* (Toronto: Azrieli Foundation, 2016), 265.