

# Jewish Self-Fashioning and Translated Yiddish Literature

## The Case of Germany and Austria, 1890–1939

### Projektbericht

Between 1890 and 1939, countless works of Yiddish literature—stories, poems, plays, and novels—were translated into German and published by various periodicals and publishing houses, which often targeted Jewish readers in particular, but which also numbered among them mainstream publishers like Insel and Georg Müller Verlag. My research project, which will lead to a monograph, focuses on translated Yiddish literature of this period. It asks specifically: what works were translated? How were they translated and received? And: what role did they play in German and German Jewish culture?<sup>1</sup> In addressing these questions, this project seeks to address three further related issues. The first is that of German and German Jewish relations with the Jews of Eastern Europe, a subject that scholars have previously addressed, even as they have rarely acknowledged, let alone analyzed, the abundance of literary texts translated from Yiddish.<sup>2</sup>

The second issue concerns that of how to situate German Jews in regard to both Jewish

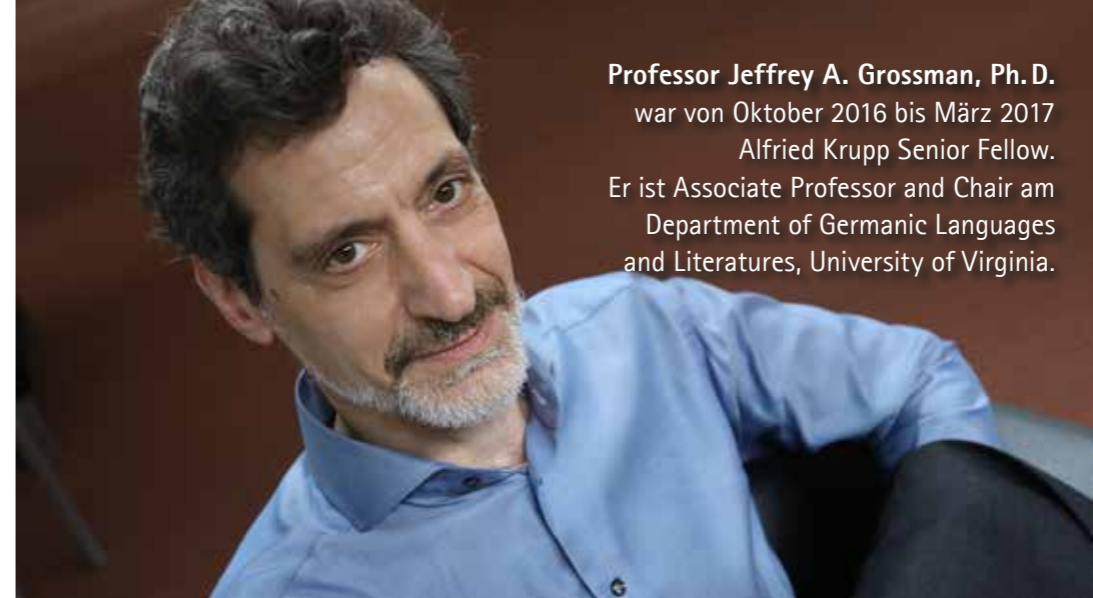
and German culture and history. Specifically, how did German Jews' response to Yiddish relate to their own self-understanding? Or, put differently, did Yiddish literature become one kind of vehicle for this self-understanding, and if so, in what way? This question extends

---

Kaisserreich und in der Weimarer Republik," in *Jüdische Sprachen in deutscher Umwelt: Hebräisch und Jiddisch von der Aufklärung bis ins 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Michael Brenner (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 85–95; Sabine Koller, „On (Un)translatibility: Sholem Aleichem's *Ayznban-geshikhtes (Railroad Stories)* in German Translation," in *Translating Sholem Aleichem: History, Politics, and Art*, ed. Gennady Estraikh, Jordan Finkin, Kerstin Hoge, and Mikhail Krutikov (London: Legenda, 2012), 138–44; Jeffrey A. Grossman "Translation and Jewish Self-Fashioning in Germany and North America," in *Trans-lation – Trans-nation – Trans-formation: Übersetzen und jüdische Kulturen*, ed. Petra Ernst, Hans-Joachim Hahn, Daniel Hoffmann, Dorothea Salzer (Hanover, Germany: Studienverlag, 2012) 167–80; the 1980s witnessed a series of breakthrough studies of German and German Jewish responses to East European Jews: see, especially, Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); Trude Mauerer, *Ostjuden in Deutschland, 1918–1933* (Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1986); Jack Wertheimer, *Unwelcome Strangers. East European Jews in Imperial Germany* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and, more controversially, Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-hatred: Antisemitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

1 The term "German" here refers not to any one specific country, but to the German language, and to literature and culture produced in the language, whether in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, or Czechoslovakia, etc.

2 Among the few exceptions are, for instance, Delphine Bechtel, "Jiddische Literatur und Kultur in Berlin in



Professor Jeffrey A. Grossman, Ph.D.  
war von Oktober 2016 bis März 2017  
Alfried Krupp Senior Fellow.  
Er ist Associate Professor and Chair am  
Department of Germanic Languages  
and Literatures, University of Virginia.

Jeffrey A. Grossman, born 1961 in New York; Ph.D. 1992, Comparative Literature, University of Texas-Austin, with a diss. on the discourse on Yiddish in Germany in the 18th & 19th centuries; co-ed. with P. Ernst & U. Wyrwa, *The Great War: Reflections, Experiences and Memories of German and Habsburg Jews (1914 – 1918)*, spec. issue of the online journal *Quest*, Oct. 2016; visiting professorships at Univ. of

California, Berkeley (spring 2007), and *Zentrum für jüdische Studien*, Universität Graz (May–June 2012). Interests: Yiddish, German, German Jewish cultural history, memory, recognition (*Anerkennung*), and translation/transmission of knowledge and literature. At the University of Virginia since 1996, he teaches in the German Dept., and in Comp. Lit. and Jewish Studies; chair of German since 2013.

### Kurzvita

### »Jewish Self-Fashioning and Translated Yiddish Literature. The Case of Germany and Austria, 1890–1939

The Yiddish language and Yiddish-speakers had a long and problematic reception in the German-language sphere dating back to the Enlightenment and continuing up to the Second World War. Apart from claims by antisemites that Yiddish, as a corrupt form of German, gave expression to the corrupt nature of Jews per se, many German Jews viewed Yiddish as the very image of East European Jewish "Unbildung", while the Yiddish-speaking *Ostjuden* recalled for them the nightmare of their own ghetto past. Yet, from 1890 onward, an increasing number of Yiddish literary texts found their way into German translation, so that by 1933 they numbered at least sixty volumes, some issued in multiple printings, with many further works published in periodicals or anthologies that included literature from other languages. This study explores the role of that translated

Yiddish literature in the German and German Jewish cultural sphere. It argues that 1) the translations often posed a challenge to the frequently pejorative image of Yiddish, while introducing a new and very different Yiddish presence in German; and 2) the translations formed the basis for the emergence of a new kind of Jewish minority culture in Germany, one in dialogue and often at odds with other competing expressions of German Jewish minority culture of the time. Hence, the study of translated Yiddish literature prompts a reconsideration of the nature of German Jewry and of relations between Jews and non-Jews. Ultimately, the study also has relevance for understanding the role that translation can play in the interaction between minority and majority cultures more generally.

### Fellow-Projekt

beyond that of whether German Jews read Yiddish texts to ask whether Yiddish literary texts acquired for them a special symbolic status, and whether it contributed to what some scholars have described as a distinct German Jewish subculture or minority culture before 1933. Historians George Mosse and David Sorkin, for instance, introduced arguments in the 1980s that remain highly influential today. They claimed that the continual focus of German Jews on *Bildung* as a personal and cultural value long after the concept's heyday during the German Enlightenment distinguished them from non-Jews. *Bildung* became the key symbol, according to David Sorkin, around which a German Jewish "subculture" constituted itself, albeit a subculture that remained invisible to German Jews themselves.<sup>3</sup> More recently, historians John Efron and Carsten Schapkow and literary scholar Jonathan Skolnik have stressed the German Jewish emulation of Sephardic Jewry and its constitutive role in their own self-fashioning, resulting, in Skolnik's view, in a distinct German Jewish minority culture.<sup>4</sup> What Skolnik et al. share

3 George Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1985); David Sorkin, *The Transformation of German Jewry, 1780-1840* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

4 Carsten Schapkow, *Vorbild und Gegenbild: Das iberische Judentum in der deutsch-jüdischen Erinnerungskultur 1779-1939* (Köln: Böhlau, 2011); Jonathan Skolnik, *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions: History, Memory, and Minority Culture in Germany, 1824-1955* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); John M. Efron, *German Jewry and the Allure of the Sephardic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). In making this argument, Skolnik—the one literary scholar in this group—follows a suggestion by his former teacher, the late historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, who in an important inquiry into Jewish memory and historiography, maintained that works of fiction rather than history would remain the crucible in which modern Jewish memory and identity were forged; see Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

with Mosse and Sorkin despite their different emphases, approaches, and terminology is the view that German Jews defined themselves not primarily through religious observance, but through attachments to particular secularized symbols, and that these attachments evolved into codes around which the sub- or minority culture emerged within the larger mainstream culture, in which German Jews concurrently participated. By shifting the focus onto translated Yiddish literature and the images it generated, this project seeks to re-describe the forms such a minority culture could assume.

The final and third concern of this project is to document one of the first major periods of translation of Yiddish literature into a language other than Hebrew. To be sure, Yiddish was also translated into English and Spanish, particularly in Argentina, in this period, and this project gives some attention—for the sake of comparison—to English-language translations. At the same time, the sheer quantity of translations into German at this time should give pause, for it attests to this often barely acknowledged presence of Yiddish literature in the German and German Jewish public sphere.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the specifically Jewish context, this study also seeks to shed further light on another much discussed question—namely that of how non-dominant or minor literary languages find their way into translation in major (or dominant) languages. Additionally, it seeks, more generally, to shed light on the ways migrant groups are perceived by the countries in which they arrive, and how,

5 By my own as yet incomplete count, at least sixty volumes of Yiddish literature appeared in German translation between 1890 and 1933, and another five appeared by 1939, and this does not include the many stories published in various periodicals or anthologies of works hailing from more than one language.

in turn, their life-worlds might find expression in the languages of the new "host" countries.

### Why this focus on Yiddish, though? And how are translation and transmission conceived of in this project?

To answer the second question first: literary translation and transmission are conceived here as intimately related processes, constituting different aspects of a single larger process, namely, the rewriting of literary and other works of a source culture in a second (target) language in ways that produce knowledge, even when it is flawed knowledge, about the source culture. While constituting parts of a larger process with certain similar ends, translation and transmission do not rewrite in identical ways, since the translated text offers a kind of image and knowledge of the source text that differs in its details from a review or interpretation, and which can allow the translated text to open up more varied possibilities of knowledge in the target culture.<sup>6</sup> The approach to translation and transmission taken here is indebted to the work of the late André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett, as well as to Theo Hermans, Lawrence Venuti, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Itamar Even Zohar, Maria Tymoczko, Doris Bachmann-Medick, or, more recently, Rita Felski, among others.<sup>7</sup>

6 André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. London: Routledge, 1992.

7 Besides Lefevere (1992), see, for instance: Susan Bassnett, *Reflections on Translation* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2011); Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, "Where Are We in Translation Studies?" In: Bassnett and Lefevere, *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998. 1-11; Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge, 1995; Kwame Anthony Appiah "Thick Translation," in: Lawrence Venuti, ed. (London: Routledge, 2004, 2. rev. ed); Itamar Even-Zohar, "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem," *Poetics Today* 11.1 (1990), 45-51 as well as his article "The Role of Russian



Abb. 1: Übersetzung von Werken des renommierten jiddischen Schriftstellers J. L. Perez (Insel Verlag, ca. 1920)

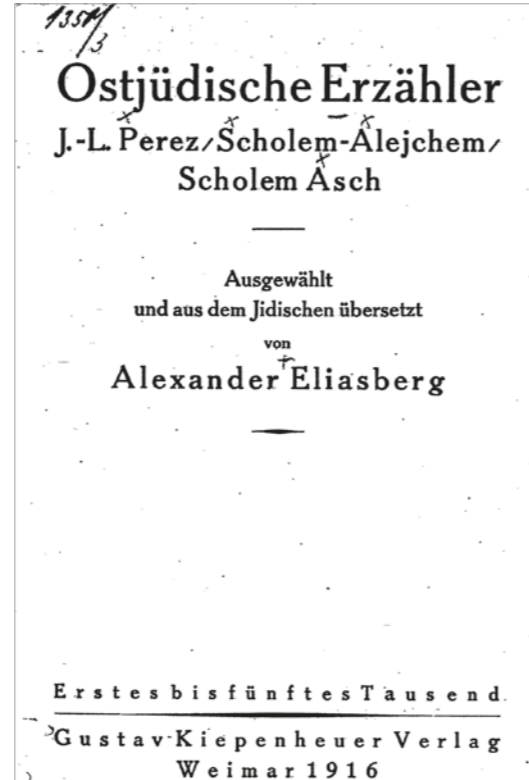
Whatever their differences, all these scholars view translation as not merely a linguistic, but also a cultural process, and as one that intervenes in the literature and culture targeted by the translator. These scholars further reject the notion that translations can produce an ideal text that achieves complete

and Yiddish in the Making of Modern Hebrew," *Poetics Today* 11.1 (1990), 111-120; Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2009), 238-283; Theo Hermans, *Translating Others* (Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Publ., 2006); Rita Felski, "Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory," *Comparative Literature Studies* 53:4 (2016), 747-765.



Abb. 2: Titelblatt von einer viel gelesenen Sammlung – auch nach dem 2. Weltkrieg – übersetzter Erzählungen von renommierten jiddischen Schriftstellern

linguistic equivalence with the source text (or "original"). Translators must rather on some level rewrite the text in response to conditions and constraints—poetic, cultural, ideological, and so forth—in the target culture. And this problem holds whether the translator seeks to "domesticate" the text according to target culture norms or to challenge those norms, by, for instance, stressing the foreignness of the text—or indeed by means of some combination of the two. In this regard, Bachmann-Medick writes of translational spaces (*Übersetzungsräume*) where social tensions—between different cultures, social strata, or religious groups—are played out, while Lefevre and Bassnett speak of both "poetics" (or "textual grids") and ideology (defined non-pejoratively as "cultural grids") that inform



the translator as she (invariably) rewrites the text for the target culture<sup>8</sup>.

To turn now to the first question "Why Yiddish": Its answer requires that we delve into the ways that Yiddish was often viewed. By the twentieth century, Germans and German Jews had come to view the Yiddish language, as Steven Aschheim and others have noted, as a corrupt form of German, as the language of "Unbildung"; for German Jews, it conveyed in its very sounds the nightmare of the ghetto past from which they had emerged only a century earlier. As a result, the possibility of *belles lettres*, of a sophisticated literature,

<sup>8</sup> Bachmann-Medick 267; Bassnett and Lefevre 1-11; Lefevre 12-24.

or "high culture" in Yiddish appeared—at least for most observers before 1890—as a contradiction in terms, with the expression "jiddische Literatur" constituting a veritable oxymoron<sup>9</sup>. To note this is not to suggest that popular or "folk" culture, East European or otherwise, is any less deserving of recognition. It is rather to suggest how profound the misapprehension and miscommunication between East and West often were.

To cite one example, which can also serve as a framework for this analysis: in his essay "Die innere Lage des polnischen Judentums" (1916), the young Nachum Goldmann could at one moment take German Jews to task for their failure to explore the world of Polish Jewry "from the inside," for viewing Polish Jews merely as the object of German or Polish national interests rather than as the *subject* of their own beliefs and actions, only to declare a moment later that the fundamental fact of Polish Jewry consists in its "political undevelopment" ("politische Unentwickeltheit"). This lack of development, he added, derived from political conditions in Poland, but more importantly from the fact that "das osteuropäische Judentum ... in seiner großen Masse ja heute noch geistig und kulturell in der Lebensform des Ghetto [lebt]."<sup>10</sup> A condition of 2000 years of diaspora life, this ghetto mentality and life form prevented

<sup>9</sup> It must be noted that the problem of Yiddish as a literary language was one also felt deeply by the first modern writers of Yiddish literary texts—dating back to the Jewish Enlightenment (or Haskala) that arose in the circles around Moses Mendelssohn in the eighteenth century—and continuing well into the second half of the nineteenth century; the central difference was that they lived and worked within the language, and in adopting it as their literary language, they also transformed and enriched it, with the later writers ultimately choosing to commit to it wholeheartedly; see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised* (Syracusa, NY: Syracuse UP, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Nachum Goldmann, "Die innere Lage des polnischen Judentums," in *Neue Jüdische Monatshefte* 1:12 (1916), 336.



Abb. 3: Titelblatt des Programms für das Kolloquium, "Deutschsprachig-jüdische Literaturstudien. Standortbestimmung eines transdisziplinären Forschungsfeldes", bei dem es u.a. um Fragen der Übersetzung ging. Vortrag von Jeffrey A. Grossman: "Jewish Self-Fashioning and Translating Yiddish in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century"

Polish Jewry's political development, which meant for Goldmann the development of "jede[r] Möglichkeit aktiver nationaler Politik," a condition German Jews, he believed, had long since overcome.<sup>11</sup>

As this example suggests, the focus on Yiddish literature (poetry, fiction, and drama) means not to exclude other kinds of texts. Rather, it draws frequently on such texts, which help illuminate the poetics and cultural attitudes that influence poetic translations and their reception. That Goldmann's

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

article itself appeared in the *Neue Jüdische Monatshefte* (1916-1920) is significant, since the journal was one of two founded by German Jews during World War I that sought explicitly to mediate the world of East European Jewry in the German context (the other was Martin Buber's *Der Jude* [1916-1928]).

Yet, while Goldmann's article points to the conflicted attitude of German Jews toward their East European relations, the publishing of Yiddish works in translation could themselves pose a challenge to such problematic views. In a forthcoming article, which constitutes one chapter in this monograph, I argue that the publishing in the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* (AZJ) of translated stories by the Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz introduced into German Peretz's modernist literary aesthetics in a way that reviews and criticism missed. This aesthetics resonates with the modern view of music, expressed by the influential aesthetic theorist Walter Pater, as that realm of (anti-mimetic) art toward which all imaginative literature strives. The AZJ did so, moreover, even as its chief literary critic and later chief

editor, Ludwig Geiger, continued to present Yiddish literature as largely symptomatic of the backward culture of Jews from the East. Hence, the translated stories of a Peretz could pose a challenge to the views articulated about Peretz by his own interpreters in the West, relativizing or even refuting their claims. Translated Yiddish works thus helped create a new kind of East European Jewish presence in the German and German Jewish public sphere.

The monograph will go further to argue that a small but significant set of proponents of Yiddish sought in turn to construct a new kind of Jewish minority culture in the German sphere, one at odds with other forms of Jewish minority culture there, hence suggesting that not one, but multiple Jewish minority cultures co-existed and entered into dialogue and debate with one another, even as they sought to exert an impact on the majority, non-Jewish culture, and especially on the ways that the majority viewed the Jewish population in its midst.

Publications completed:

"Vom Shtetl zum Ghetto. Oder wie man einst in Deutschland die jiddische Kultur (v)erkannte", in: *Konzepte von Ehre und Anerkennung aus Diversitätstheoretischer Perspektive*, edited by Christine Kanz und Ulrike Stamm. Film – Medium – Diskurs Series. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann (*forthcoming*).

"France as Wahlheimat for Two German Jews: Heinrich Heine and Walter Benjamin," forthcoming in a volume on the subject of *Wahlheimat/Spiritual/Elective Homelands*, ed. Richard I. Cohen, Asher Biemann and Sarah Wobick.

"Jewish Self-Fashioning and Translating Yiddish in the Early Twentieth Century: Between Jewish Language and German Culture," forthcoming in *Yiddish Language and Culture. A Relay Station of Modernity and Lieu de Mémoire of Postmodernity*, ed. Olaf Terpitz, et al.

Book Manuscript Progress:

Jewish Self-Fashioning and Translated Yiddish Literature: The Case of Germany and Austria, 1890-1939 (Completion of two chapters; discovery of many new resources to include; re-organization and planning of the book manuscript itself)

Ausgewählte  
Veröffentlichungen