

Translator's Preface

When I was asked to translate the letters which follow, I answered with some caution that I would first need to see a sample of the material. As I began to find my footing, gained confidence and progressed from page to page, a number of observations occurred to me, and I discussed them with Jordan Alpert in an effort to better frame his great-great uncle, Yankev Alperowitz, who was revealing himself to us in his own words. Hopefully, I can provide some additional focus to those who read his letters.

First, I think a few facts about the Yiddish language are relevant: "In its initial period (up to the 12th century), Yiddish was the speech used by the Jews who had come from Romance-speaking areas and had settled in the regions of the middle and upper Rhine. It adapted large portions of local varieties of German. A great number of Hebrew and Aramaic words, which had been used by the Jews even before they settled in the Rhineland, became part and parcel of the language which was evolving. From the very beginning, too, Yiddish incorporated many words from the Romance languages (Old French, Old Italian), which the Jewish settlers had spoken before." (*College Yiddish*, pp.50-1) With eastward migration, "somewhat later, Slavic elements from Czech, Polish, Ukrainian and Russian were also introduced into the language."

By the time Yankev Alperowitz wrote his letters in the early years of the 20th century, Yiddish was spoken from Rumania in the south to Estonia in the north, from the Ukraine in the east to Alsace in the west. It was the language of daily communication for many, though certainly not all European Jews. It served as the lingua franca among Jews scattered across the world, and was known, affectionately, as "Mame Loshn," or mother tongue.

Yankev Alperowitz was literate to some extent, and certainly conversant in Russian. We know this from the address written in a neat hand at the end of his letters, and because he had to do formal business in that language. In his dealings with the nobleman whose timber he was employed to cut and market he might have spoken Polish. To communicate with local peasants a knowledge of Lithuanian might have been required. He is known to have traveled, on occasion, to Germany on business. He was clearly not a man without knowledge of the world beyond the forests of Kovno Gubernia. He lived in big towns from time to time, in epochs of chaos and transition. Nevertheless, the person who expresses himself in these letters is clearly rooted in tradition, and for him, as for most of his generation, the language of tradition, of intellectual aspiration was not Yiddish, "Mame Loshn," but "Loshn Khoydesh," the sacred tongue, Hebrew.

When he mentions his studying and reading he is referring most probably not to novels or newspapers, but to religious texts. His letters are full of Hebrew expressions, often abbreviated names for the Deity, with which he invokes mercy, oversight, enlightenment or intervention. In Yiddish the name he uses most frequently for God is Der Lebediker, or The Living One.

Hebrew was the language of formal reverence and intellectual status. Perhaps it was to demonstrate respect and to consecrate a bond between them that Yankev writes the letters' one sustained passage in Hebrew to his brother Simcha. What he says in it, however, differs little from the salutations and good wishes which begin all of his letters in Yiddish: Be well, prosperous, Live many years.

When he wrote in Yiddish, Yankev was reproducing an oral language whose richness speaks for itself. He writes unselfconsciously, and for all the difficulties (for the translator!) which flows from his casual approach, he isn't without a literary flourish or two.

In the midst of dealing with fundamental issues of receiving money or of expressing his gratitude or anger toward one or another of his children for their attention or lack of it, he will switch to a lyrical, philosophical tone. "One doesn't live in two worlds, and the human being is like a shadow. Time flies by, summer and winter, puff, the year's gone. This is the way all of our lives are. One year flies by a little better, the next a little worse. It's all a dream." This passage reminds me of the Stage Manager's monologues in the play "Our Town," written to reflect the same epoch, though vastly different circumstances, in a part of the world not far from Bangor, Maine.

Yankev writes one of his letters from Vilna, the capital of Lithuania, which had acquired the epithet "Der Yerushyela'im fun Lite," "The Jerusalem of Lithuania," as a long-time center of high religious scholarship. With the upheavals of the 20th century, and especially in the years between the two World Wars, Vilna flourished as a center of secular Yiddish culture as well. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, now located in New York, was established there, and began its systematic social research of folklore, language, community organization and other aspects of the lives of Eastern European Jewry. A university, whose language of instruction was Yiddish, was formed, offering classes in non-religious subjects. Many writers, poets, dramatists of great merit emerged in that atmosphere, among them Moishe Kulbak, Avrom Sutzkever, Chaim Grade. The shadow of growing fascism began to scatter many of these individuals in the late 1930's, and those who remained faced a crucible.

Finally, a few personal remarks concerning the process of translation. The first hurdle I had to overcome was Yankev's handwriting. It is not unpleasant to glance at, probably not unusual for the times, nor unfamiliar to the eyes of an archivist. Still, it required hours for me to "crack the code." The spelling, I soon realized, was less than consistent, the same word, sometimes, spelled in a variety of ways. Certain individual letters of the alphabet are used interchangeably and unpredictably to represent the same sound. There is no punctuation to speak of, neither periods nor paragraphs. (Italics and exclamations are mine.) Often, a word is broken up on the page according to the way it is spoken. "Shopping is very difficult because prices are so high", for instance, might be written, "Shopping is verydiff icult because prices are so high." Lastly, there are instances where the translation is not a certainty, but my most educated guess at a particularly puzzling or indecipherable word or passage.

These letters, of course, were written by a man to communicate with his family, not for the sake of a translator seventy years hence. The problems encountered, however, have made the task no less challenging or rewarding. Yankev writes in bold, vivid strokes, and the process of transforming his meaning from one language to another has enabled me to relive the moments of his thought and feeling, a true journey of my own.

Daniel Marlin

Berkeley, California
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The Letters of Yankev Alperowitz

The correspondents and cast of characters:

Auntie: Yankev's second wife.

Chaim Epstein: Hyman Epstein, married to Yankev's niece, Sarah Cohen.

Eliohu: Yankev's second son, who stayed in Russia.

Fargament: A forester. Yankev's, and later, Reuven's employer.

Hannah: Annie Cohen Costrell

Mendel: Max Cohen

Moshe Shimson: Simon Cohen

Reuven: Robert Cohen

Shayne: Sophie Cohen Bromberg

Shprintze: Alice Cohen

Simcha: Samuel H. Cohen

Simcha: Samuel M. Cohen - Yankev's brother.

Yankev: Jacob Cohen - Alice's husband and nephew of Yankev.

Yehudeske: Julia Cohen Saltzman

Zalman: Solomon Costrell.

