

“A DIFFERENT KIND OF HELL”:
ORALITY, MULTILINGUALISM,
AND AMERICAN YIDDISH
IN THE TRANSLATION OF
SHOLEM ALEICHEM’S
MISTER BOYM IN KLOZET

by

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I wish to address two basic questions that are confronted in the translation of “immigrant” or “border” literature.¹ (1) What is the translator to do with a multilingual source text? And (2) How should one approach a literary transcription of a text that is already a literary transcription of an oral culture, without betraying that culture?

The traditional approach, which argues that a translation should sound like “it was written in” the Target Language, would probably posit the following: The Source Language audience was multilingual, and would presumably have understood all of the Source Text, therefore one should translate into a single Target Language so that all of the text can be understood by the Target audience. But recent theorists in the field of translation studies have argued

1 I use “border” in D. Emily Hicks’s sense of the term: “What makes border writing a world literature with a ‘universal’ appeal is its emphasis upon the multiplicity of languages within any single language, by choosing a strategy of translation rather than representation, border writers ultimately determine the distinction between original and alien culture.” Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis, 1991), p. xxiii. Further complicating this issue, Andre Lefevere notes that translations themselves are “texts produced on the borderline between two systems.” Lefevere, “*Mother Courage’s Cucumbers*: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature,” *Modern Language Studies* 12, no. 4 (1982): 4.

that we should attempt to preserve some of the multilingual elements, some of the "foreignness" of the Source Text, even at the expense of creating an estranging polyglot text.² True, the latter is a bit problematic, but to eliminate the multilingual elements of the original text is even *more* problematic.

Very little conclusive work has been done in this area. Michael S. Doyle has written about preserving the deliberate use of foreign terms in a Source Text, but his study is restricted to titles.³ An article by Rogelio Reyes on Chicano literature introduces the term "interlanguage" to refer to a text written "in a synthesis or blend of two separate languages."⁴ Reyes mentions the "lack of a tradition and lack of methodology"⁵ for approaching a multilingual source text, and sums up the issue as follows:

If the purpose of translation is merely to make the message of the original accessible to the English reader, a monolingual presentation would be more appropriate. If, however, a deeper understanding of the original is intended, e.g., of the writer's skill with form and content, the interlineal presentation would be more appropriate.⁶

Reyes's "interlineal" translation of a Chicano poem takes the following form

I hear huesos [bones] crack
 in pain
 y lloros [and anguish]
 la bruja pangs [—the witch's pangs]
 sus hijos han olvidado [her sons have forgotten] 7

2 See for example Samia Mehrez, "Translation and the Postcolonial Experience: The Francophone North African Text," in *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London, 1992), Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, 1992), and Lawrence Venuti, introduction to *Rethinking Translation*.

3 E.g., Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra*, Michael S. Doyle, "Contemporary Spanish and Spanish American Fiction in English: Tropes of Fidelity in the Translation of Titles," *Translation Review* 30–31 (1989): 41–46.

4 Rogelio Reyes, "The Translation of Interlingual Texts: A Chicano Example," in *Translating Latin America: Culture as Text: Translation Perspectives VI*, ed. William Luis and Julio Rodríguez-Luis (Binghamton, 1991), p. 301.

5 Ibid., p. 302.

6 Ibid., p. 303.

7 Ibid.

I found this a useful tool for one or two circumstances encountered in the translation of Sholem Aleichem's one-act comedy, *Mister Boym in Klozet*.

Yiddish writers were by definition multilingual, because Yiddish was never the "master" language of the countries in which they lived; in addition, any Jewish male educated enough to pick up a pen in Yiddish most likely knew Hebrew as well. The classic Yiddish texts may not be interlanguages in Reyes's sense of the term, but they are certainly products of the marginal, cultural hybridization that can be said to characterize border literature.⁸

The traditional "grandfather" of Yiddish literature, Mendele Moicher-Sforim (ca. 1836–1917), wrote about this Jewish version of what W. E. B. Du Bois, writing of the African-American experience, termed "double consciousness":

Our sages have said that a Jew has two souls, a weekday one and a holy one. Our Hebrew language is the holy one, a holy and pure language, in which the world is seen as in a mirror, and which is as old as the world and whose spring will never run dry. The other language is the weekday one, of pain and suffering, as sad as the Jewish soul is during the week. And these two souls, these two languages . . . I would not want to exchange for another language.⁹

This split was so severe that the young David Pinski (1872–1959) did not realize that I. L. Peretz (1852–1915), the Hebrew romantic poet, and Peretz, the Yiddish satirist, were the same person,¹⁰ and that the name of the first, ground-breaking Yiddish literary journal, *Kol Mevasser*, was a Hebrew expression.¹¹ Peretz believed that "the Jews were in the anomalous position of being an ethnonational group without a truly national language."¹²

8 "Marginality may have been the Jew's archetypal experience," says Ruth R. Wisse in her introduction to *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas* (New York, 1973), p. 14.

9 Charles A. Madison, *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers* (New York, 1968), p. 48.

10 Ruth R. Wisse, *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Seattle, 1991), pp. 40–41.

11 As a microcosmic example of the issues in this article, the title of this journal has been translated variously as "The voice which brings tidings," Joseph and Frances Butwin, *Sholem Aleichem* (Boston, 1977), p. 29, "A Heralding Voice," Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1973), p. 5, and "Voice of the Herald," Wisse, *A Shtetl*, p. 3.

12 Joshua A. Fishman, *Yiddish: Turning to Life* (Amsterdam, 1991), p. 30.

This multilingual anxiety is avoided, condensed, or cut entirely in many translations.

In spite of its unifying nature (the "Yiddish speech community . . . interacted with other far-away Yiddish-speaking communities vastly more than with the neighboring speakers of the local or national non-Jewish languages. . . . Yiddish literature was launched for a pan-European market of readers"),¹³ Yiddish was looked down upon for being "grammarless"¹⁴ and even worse.

For those who could absorb themselves in the learning of the Torah to waste their time on [Yiddish literature] was considered sinful. . . . it was the *maskilim*'s accepted notion that grammatical "confusion" and dialectical divergency in Yiddish stemmed from the original aesthetic sin of "mixture" or "corruption" of Hebrew and German. They believed in a linguistic myth which attributed to Yiddish an aesthetically "pure" past as well as a "fall."¹⁵

The Hebrew-Yiddish split is not unique. Parallel situations exist today between classical and vernacular Arabic, Greek, Tamil, Sinhalese, Hindi, etc. Although the latter binaries are, in Joshua Fishman's words, "genetically related," in all cases the "high" language is "no one's mother tongue."¹⁶ This is similar to the relationship of Latin to the Romance tongues. "As Dante put it: 'Latin is perpetual and incorruptible, and the vulgar language [i.e., Italian] is unstable and corruptible.'¹⁷ Dan Miron notes that literary bilingualism or multilingualism was common in Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but has been rare since then because it "goes against our cultural grain. It contradicts our basic modern (i.e., Romantic) notion of good and 'true' literary expression. This expression, we have become inclined to assume, cannot survive the loss of utmost directness, which means that it is usually not to be achieved in any but a native tongue."¹⁸ Although Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916) felt that "even when you write in Hebrew, you think

13 Dovid Katz, *Grammar of the Yiddish Language* (London, 1987), pp xviii–xix

14 Fishman, *Yiddish*, p 22

15 Miron, *Traveler Disguised*, pp 2, 65

16 Joshua A. Fishman, "Bilingualism and Biculturalism as Individual and as Societal Phenomena," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 1, no 1 (1980) 4

17 Jan Ziolkowski, "Cultural Diglossia and the Nature of Medieval Latin Literature," in *The Ballad and Oral Literature*, ed Joseph Harris (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), p 194

18 Miron, *Traveler Disguised*, p 7

in Yiddish," both he and Peretz agreed that Yiddish required the importation of such "foreign" words as *kritik* and *poezye* in order for complex literary ideas to be discussed.¹⁹ Yet an appreciation of these multilingual borrowings in Yiddish transcended class and education. David Roskies writes that "On both sides of the Atlantic, Sholem Aleichem's stories were read aloud as part of a Friday evening or Saturday afternoon ritual, and even the most unsophisticated listeners could laugh at the trilingual wordplay that now requires lengthy annotation."²⁰

Sholem Aleichem's *Mister Boym in Klozet* was written in the United States in 1915. It clearly exhibits that the cultural adaptation of Yiddish borrowing did not stop once Yiddish reached the "land of Columbus," but rather picked up speed. Sol Steinmetz mentions the canonization in Yiddish dictionaries of such words as "pedler" and "olrayt," and the unofficial replacement of Yiddish terms with English equivalents such as "biznes," "trobl," and "mister" in Yiddish newspapers.²¹ All of these appear in this play, and must be dealt with accordingly. In fact, when I was attempting to identify English-Yiddish borrowings in *Mister Boym in Klozet*, I came across

צי ער וויל, איך זאל פעדלען מיט טיי, מיט וויין און מיט ציגיינערען?

Tsi er vil, ikh zol pedlen mit tey, mit vayn un mit tsigayren?²²

Or does he want I should be peddling tea, wine, and cigars?

"Pedlen" seemed a likely candidate. But Weinreich's dictionary had it as an entry, quite plainly defined as "peddle."²³ But I learned from Steinmetz that this *is* a borrowing, used so extensively (which makes sense historically, given most immigrants' job prospects), that it was "naturalized" in Harkavy's 1928 dictionary. Perhaps for Mr. Boym, the Americanized Jew, it is "naturalized"

19 Ibid., pp. 18, 64 Again, this is not unique to Yiddish. All languages which were oral, when textualized, have needed an infusion of new vocabulary (e.g., Spanish under Alfonso X, nineteenth-century Romanian, even Latinate terms in English can be traced to this).

20 David G. Roskies, "Introduction to Sholem Aleichem: The Critical Tradition," *Proof-texts* 6, no. 1 (1986): 1.

21 Sol Steinmetz, *Yiddish and English: A Century of Yiddish in America* (Tuscaloosa, 1986), pp. 30–35.

22 Sholem Aleichem, "Mister Boym in Klozet," *Ale Verk fun Sholem Aleikhem* (New York, 1944), 4:289.

23 Uriel Weinreich, *Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary* (New York, 1968), p. 491.

Yiddish. But in the mouth of Shprintzel, his newly arrived sister, it is a borrowing.

Suzanne Romaine employs the term "code-switching," defined by J. J. Gumpers as "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems." According to Romaine,

The type of behavior characteristically referred to as code-switching is obviously different in many respects to what happens in the situation described . . . as diglossia . . . where two languages or varieties co-exist and are specialized according to function. There is an almost one-to-one relationship between language choice and social context.²⁴

Additionally, it is common to incorporate the borrowed words into the grammatical structure of the "mother" tongue.²⁵

J. R. Rayfield, however, mentions that the bilingual majority of American Yiddish speakers nearly always quote proverbs, "whether they are English, Russian, Polish or Yiddish," in the original language.²⁶ These last two concepts were useful for solving several translation problems.

A second issue is orality. Although historically Jews have had a high rate of literacy, orality and the oral mindset are major structural features in many of the works by the "Big Three" of classic Yiddish literature, Mendele Moicher-Sforim, I. L. Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem. This, too, is a result of the high/low Hebrew-Yiddish split. Although "Jews approximated universal male literacy from the preexilic period of their history onward,"²⁷ that literacy would have been primarily in Hebrew, leaving Yiddish—until the advent of nineteenth-century Yiddish literature—with the second-class status of a grammarless jargon in which appeared (paradoxically) books that were viewed as being only for women. Although Hodl, the daughter of Sholem Aleichem's most famous literary creation, Tevye the Milkman, "reads and writes both Yiddish and Russian,"²⁸ her education represents both the rise of a modernity that will destroy the old lifestyle and also one of the author's

24 Suzanne Romaine, *Bilingualism* (Oxford, 1989), p. 111

25 Ibid., pp. 133 ff

26 J. R. Rayfield, *The Languages of a Bilingual Community* (The Hague, 1970), p. 55

27 Fishman, *Yiddish*, p. 27

28 Sholem Aleichem, "Hodl," *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York, 1987), pp. 53–54

recurring motifs in the Tevye stories—depicting poor, hard-working Jews who are nevertheless extremely well read and insightful compared with the rich Jews of “Yehupets” (Kiev), who are every bit as stupid and hateful as the supposed enemy, the rich capitalists of the dominant nationality (Cf Shimele’s pride in his daughter, Beylke, in *The Jackpot* “God gave me a daughter with a sharp mind . . . She can read and write and handle figures like nobody’s business! . . . She’s a smart girl—she can read Yiddish and Russian and German and anything you want”²⁹ Beylke chooses to run away from home rather than be betrothed to upper-class twit Solomon Fein)

First, some of the general characteristics of orality “Man without writing thinks in terms of sound groups and not in words, and the two do not necessarily coincide,” writes Albert B. Lord, and he goes on to note the religious roots of formulaic repetition.³⁰ Jack Goody includes the following in a list of syntactic differences between the written and spoken registers

Writing has the qualities of reliance on a more deliberate method of organizing ideas, using such expository concepts as “thesis,” “topic sentence,” and “supporting evidence” . . . preferential elimination of false starts, repetitions, digressions, and other redundancies which characterize informal spontaneous speech.³¹

And among the many characteristics of orality described by Walter J. Ong are its additive, redundant, participatory (nonobjective), agonistic, and formulaic nature.³² We shall now narrow the circle to some specifics of Yiddish orality. Roskies writes that “of all Jewish subcultures Yiddish is the closest to the folk tradition,”³³ and Ken Frieden writes, “Sholem Aleichem is best known as an author who speaks for the common people . . . because his digressive, free-associative style is most effective when attributed to untrained narrators.”³⁴

29 Sholem Aleichem, *The Jackpot* trans. Kobi Weitzner and Barnett Zumoff (New York 1989), pp. 46, 53.

30 Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 25, 65–67.

31 Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge 1987) pp. 263–264.

32 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982) pp. 37, 39, 45, 110.

33 David G. Roskies, “The Story’s the Thing: Afterword,” *Prooftexts* 5, no. 1 (1985): 68.

34 Ken Frieden, “Sholem Aleichem: Monologues of Mastery,” *Modern Language Studies* 19, no. 2 (1989): 25.

Indeed, the most popular of Sholem Aleichem's works are usually monologues directed to a single listener, or dialogue overheard by such a listener. Benjamin Harshav attributes the subject of the riddle, "Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question?" (to which the answer is, "Why not?") to "some essential characteristics of 'Talmudic' dialectical argument and questioning, combined with typical communicative patterns evolved in the precarious, marginal, Diaspora existence."³⁵

Ong widens the scope of this issue to other oral cultures: "In oral cultures a request for information is often interpreted interactively . . . as agonistic, and, instead of being really answered, is frequently parried."³⁶ Thus a visitor to County Cork, Ireland, who asks a local, "Is this the post office?" receives the reply, "'Twouldn't be a postage stamp you were lookin' for, would it?"³⁷ So one may question how much of this "special kind of indirection"³⁸ in Yiddish speech patterns is the result of a unique "Talmudic dialectical argument" style ingrained in the culture, or whether it may be a characteristic of all oral cultures. The uniqueness of Yiddish is that it is an oral culture embedded within a literate culture, a true "double consciousness."

The question is, How is a translator to deal with this formulaic repetitiveness? One prominent translator of Sholem Aleichem, the author's own granddaughter Tamara Kahana, unfortunately did her work before the recent advances in translation theory. Declaring in her introduction to *Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son* that "Yiddish is hardly translatable," she announces, "I have therefore ruthlessly sacrificed strange rhythms and exotic expressions . . . for the preservation of a picture of a normal child in abnormal circumstances."³⁹ Kahana's translations remain authoritative, but clearly this is an unacceptable attitude today.

What of the other extreme? Harshav makes a good case for refraining from word-for-word literal translation with his translation of a passage from "Tevye Goes to Eretz Israel":

35 Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 91

36 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 68–69

37 Ibid., p. 69

38 Harshav, *Meaning of Yiddish*, p. 100

39 Sholem Aleichem, "A Note to the Reader," *Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son*, trans. Tamara Kahana (New York, 1952), no pagination. Similarly, Jeffrey Shandler quotes a 1948 tribute to Sholem Aleichem that labels him "the most untranslatable of writers." Shandler, "Reading Sholem Aleichem from Left to Right," *YIVO Annual* 20 (1991): 309

"Eh, I says to her, Golde dear, there is a verse, says I, 'if as sons or as servants'—as it goes with children, so it goes without children, I say We have, says I, a great God, says I, and a good God, and a strong God, says I, and nevertheless, says I, may I have the number of blessings as the number of times The-Master-of-the-Universe, says I, comes up with a piece of work that better, says I, that all my enemies should have such a year" But she, may she forgive me, is a female, so she says "You're sinning, Tevye You must not, says she, sin" "Look at this new thing, says I, did I say something, says I, bad? Would I, says I, go, God forbid, against the ways of the Lord, says I? Because if, says I, He already, says I, created such a beautiful world, says I, that the children are not children, says I, and father-mother are mud, says I, so He probably knows what He has to do" But she does not understand what I say and answers me out of the blue "I'm dying, says she, Tevye, who will cook your supper?"⁴⁰

Clearly, there are too many "says I's" for the modern English reader Hillel Halkin, who writes in his introduction to *Tevye the Dairyman*, "The translator can and should retain some of these, but being overly faithful to them makes the English tiresome, and I have left quite a few out Wherever the reader sees one such expression in the English, he can assume there may be more in the Yiddish,"⁴¹ has translated the above passage (calling the story, "Tevye Leaves for the Land of Israel") as follows

I said to her, "Eh Golde, my dearest It says in the prayer book, *im kevonim im ka'avodim*—it's no different without children than with them Either way there's a great, kind, merciful God above I only wish I had a ruble for every dirty trick He's played on us "

But my wife, may she forgive me, was a female through and through "It's a sin to talk that way, Tevye," she said "You musn't be sinful "

"What did I say wrong?" I asked her "Did I say anything against God? I'm sure that if He chose to make a wonderful world like this in which children aren't children anymore and parents are nothing at all, He knew exactly what he was doing "

She didn't follow a word of that, though, because she only said to me in a whisper, looking at me with two eyes that could have crumbled a stone, "Oh, Tevye, I'm dying Who'll cook your supper when I'm gone?"⁴²

40 Harshav, *Meaning of Yiddish* p 105

41 Sholom Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories* trans Hillel Halkin (New York, 1987), p xxxix

42 Ibid, p 98

Most notably, many “says I’s” have been replaced by new paragraph indentations, and the Hebrew quotation has been left in, transliterated, and discussed in a footnote. Clearly, this is a vast improvement over excessive literalness, but translators must also be aware of excessive “improvements.” To cut the oral elements in a story is to cut an essential cultural quality—to change the text from an oral to a literary style.

I. L. Peretz’s Hasidic tale, “*Oyb Nisht Nokh Hekher*” (“If Not Even Higher”) exhibits characteristics of an oral tale told by one speaker to one or more listeners. The opening sentence

און דער נעמיראווער פלעגט סליחות-צייט יעדן פרימאָרגן נעלם ווערן, פאַרשווינדן!
 Un der Nemirover flegt slikhes-tsayt yedn frimorgn nelm vern, farshvindn!⁴³

is translated by Eli Katz quite literally as “And every morning at the time for the penitential prayers, the Nemirover *rebbe* would disappear; vanish!”⁴⁴ Katz’s parallel-text translation is intended to be as literal as possible, and therefore exhibits some of the problems seen above in Harshav’s literal Tevye, yet it also contains some elements that have been excised from more literarily informed translations. By beginning the story with the word “And,” Peretz marks the tale as words spilling from the mouth of a speaker. Marie Syrkin’s translation is probably better for the general reader, but the opening “And” is dropped: “Early every Friday morning, at the time of the Penitential Prayers, the rabbi of Nemirov would vanish.”⁴⁵ Note also how the oral repetition—“disappear; vanish!”—has been cut.

Later in the story the voice of the narrator is inserted:

איך געדענק שוין נישט, חולין צי נדרים!
 Ikh gedenk shoyrn nisht, khulin tsi nedorim.⁴⁶

Katz leaves it in: “I can’t remember whether it was ‘Profane Things’ or ‘Vows.’”⁴⁷ Syrkin drops the sentence completely. Why? One final example of oral repetition in this tale:

43 I. L. Peretz, “Oyb Nisht Nokh Hekher,” *Ale Verk* (New York, 1900), 5 136

44 I. L. Peretz, “If Not Even Higher,” *Selected Stories*, trans. Eli Katz (New York, 1991), p. 270

45 I. L. Peretz, “If Not Higher,” *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse, trans. Marie Syrkin (New York, 1990), p. 178

46 Peretz, *Ale Verk*, p. 137

47 Peretz, *Selected Stories*, p. 272

– ווער איז – פרעגט מען דערשראקן פון שטוב ארויס. דער ליטוואַק דערקענט, אַז עס איז אַ קול פון אַ אידענע, פון אַ קראַנקער אידענע.

Ver iz? Fregt men dershrokn fun shtub aroys Der Litvak derkent az es iz a kol fun a yidene, fun a kranker yidene ⁴⁸

Katz “Who is it? —A frightened voice calls from within The Litvak recognizes a woman’s voice, the voice of a sick woman”⁴⁹ Syrkın “Who is there?” asks a frightened voice The Litvak recognizes it as the voice of a sick Jewish woman,”⁵⁰ which condenses but does not eliminate

Sholem Aleichem’s *Railroad Stories* are presented as dialogues overheard by the persona of Sholem Aleichem’s narrator while riding on trains. But even this narrator exhibits oral repetition that is cut in translation. In the story “*Tsugenumen*” (“Taken Away”), for example, one finds the following passages

דאָס איז געווען אַ קול פון אויבען. מיינע צוויי פאַרשווינען (און איך אויך) פאַררייסען די קעפּ ארויף, הויבען אויף די אויגען אויף דער אויבערשטער באַנק. פון דער אויבערשטער באַנק הענגען אראָפּ צוויי פיס אין טיעפע גומענע קאַלאַשען. די צוויי פיס מיט די טיעפע גומענע קאַלאַשען טראָגען אויף היך אַ אידען מיט אַ שוואַרצען צעקודעלטען קאַפּ, מיט אַ פאַרשלאָפען פנים, וואָס העהט אויס ווי געשוואָלען.

ביידע תאָפען היך אויף אויף די פיס, קוקען איינס אויף דאָס אַנדערע, און ביידע – אויפֿן פאַרשוין פון דער אויבערשטער באַנק. דער פאַרשוין פון דער אויבערשטער באַנק קוקט צו היי אַראָפּ מיט’ן פאַרשוואָלענעם פנים:

אַלע דריי קוקען היך אָן, גלייך ווי היי וואַלטען וועלען איבערלייענען, וואָס שטעהט ביי היי אָנגעשריבען אויף די פנים. און מחמת אויף הייערע פנים ער שטעהט נישט אָנגעשריבען גאַרנישט, טהוען די צוויי אַ פרעג ביים דריטען:

Dos iz geven a kol fun oybn Mayne tsvey parshoynen (un ikh oykh) farraysn di kep aroyf, hoybn oyf di oygn oyf der oybershter bank Fun der oybershter bank hengn arop tsvey fis in tife gumene kaloshn Di tsvey fis in tife gumene kaloshn trogn oyf zikh a yidn mit a shvartzn tsekudeltn kop mit a farshlotn ponim, vos zet oys vi geshvoln

48 Peretz *Ale Verk* p 139

49 Peretz *Selected Stories* p 276

50 Peretz *I L Peretz Reader* p 180

Beyde khapn zikh oyf oyf di fis, kukn eyns oyf dos andere, un beyde—oyfn parshoyn fun der oybershter bank Der parshoyn fun der oybershter bank kukt tsu zey arop mitn farshvolenem ponim

Ale dray kukn zikh on, glaykh vi zey voltn iberleynen, vos shteyt bay zey ongeshribn oyf di penemer Un makhmes oyf zeyere penemer shteyt nisht ongeshribn gornisht, tuen di tsvey a freg baym drin ⁵¹

These could be translated fairly literally as

That was a voice from above My two people (and I too) raise our heads up, raise up our eyes, to the topmost berth From the topmost berth hang down two feet in deep rubber galoshes The two feet in the deep rubber galoshes bear with them a Jew with a black unruly head, with a sleepy face that looks swollen Both jump up to their feet, looking one at the other, and both—at the person in the topmost berth The person in the topmost berth looks down at them with his swollen face All three look at each other, just as if they wanted to read over what was written on their faces And because nothing was written on their faces, the two up and ask the third

Halkin, calling the story, “Eighteen from Pereshchepena,” renders them as follows

The last remark came from above My two Jews and I craned our necks to look up at the top berth A pair of high rubber galoshes hung down from it The feet in them belonged to a man with a head of unruly black hair and a face that was swollen from sleep The two of them were on their feet now, eyeing each other and the Jew in the upper berth, who looked swollen-facedly back down at them All three stared hard as if trying to read each other’s faces Since nothing was written there, however, the two Jews resumed their interrogation ⁵²

Not only has a great deal of the oral repetition been condensed into a more modern “literary” prose, but an additional oral characteristic is subdued—that of metonymy In his chapter “Some Psycho-dynamics of Orality,” Ong suggests that oral peoples are less prone to abstraction than literate ones ⁵³

51 Sholem Aleichem, “Tsugenumen,” *Ale Verk fun Sholem Aleykhem* (New York 1944) 7 64–66

52 Sholem Aleichem, “Eighteen from Pereshchepena” *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories* pp 164–165

53 Ong, *Orality and Literacy* pp 49–50

When the third person begins to speak, lying down in the upper berth, all that is seen of him is his boots. It is as if the boots were present, and the person attached to them an abstraction inferred from the boots—something a literate person might not consider to be a formidable leap of logic. (Sholem Aleichem uses this quite effectively to represent a child's viewpoint, as when Mottel repeatedly calls an immigration official "Buttons.")⁵⁴

So effectively did Sholem Aleichem disguise his narrator's presence in his stories that Yosef Haim Brenner, writing in 1916, asks a question that would never be asked today:

But was he a writer? . . . he was hardly a writer at all. He transcended all literary genres, literary trends and definitions—he was not a "folk writer," not even "*the* folk writer," but rather a unique poetic and folk amalgam, a living essence of the folk itself.⁵⁵

Dov Sadan brings Sholem Aleichem back to human form, but shows how close the writer was to the heartbeat of his people: "It is no accident that Ginzburg and Marek included his lullaby in their anthology [of folk songs] of 1901, thinking it to be a pure folk creation."⁵⁶

Given that Sholem Aleichem is *the* voice of the Yiddish-speaking Jews ("the writer of the Diaspora," in the words of one Israeli critic),⁵⁷ what happened when he, alone among the Big Three, emigrated to America? Between 1877 and 1917 approximately 2.5 million Yiddish speakers emigrated to America.⁵⁸ To condense or mishandle Sholem Aleichem's examination of the life they found in America is to leave the record unbalanced, with Sholem Aleichem reduced to a perhaps quaint chronicler of an old world long gone. But he is *also* the chronicler of Jews in transition—mostly in the old world, true, but several stories and plays chronicle the Jewish-American experience.

As early as 1908, when Sholem Aleichem was touring Europe and America, having fled Russia after the 1905 pogroms,⁵⁹ Ba'al-Makhshoves

54 Sholem Aleichem, *Adventures of Mottel*, p. 231

55 Yosef Haim Brenner, "On Sholem Aleichem [The Writer and the Folk]," *Prooftexts* 6, no. 1 (1986) 17

56 Dov Sadan, "Three Foundations," *Prooftexts* 6, no. 1 (1986) 56

57 *Devar Hapoelet*, Feb. 5, 1950, this reference is from Kobi Weitzner, *Sholem Aleichem in the Theater*, forthcoming, p. 134

58 Steinmetz, *Yiddish and English*, p. 16

59 Butwin, *Sholem Aleichem*, p. 14

wrote, "In the pages of his storybooks, Sholem Aleichem has captured an entire culture which is receding further and further from us."⁶⁰ Ruth R. Wisse makes the case that the "frequent problems of communication" among Eastern European Yiddish speakers depicted in the stories of Sholem Aleichem "suggest the break-up of that civilization, sometimes in gentle stages, sometimes with catastrophic suddenness."⁶¹ The plot of "*Tsugenumen*" concerns just such a breakdown in communication (along class lines) between three Jewish travelers. Sol Gittelman writes

The *shtetl* is breaking up. . . . The Yiddish writer traditionally wrote about a world and an experience which were commonly shared. In the literature of the Lower East Side, the Jew was no longer concerned with Czarist oppression, pogroms, or quotas for Jews in school. This was all part of the past. There were new problems, new preoccupations, and, ironically, new threats just as disturbing as those in the old world.⁶²

The title of this paper, "A Different Kind of Hell," is taken from Curt Leviant's translation of "Mr. Green Has a Job."⁶³ The narrative, once again, is a monologue spoken to "Mr. Sholem Aleichem," only this time on American soil, in which the speaker discusses leaving behind one kind of chaos in the old country in order to start up a new kind of chaos in the United States—but I am particularly interested in the title, which in Yiddish transliterates as "*Meester Green Hot a Dzhab*," in which the English words "mister" and "job" are transliterated into Yiddish. The evidence that these are borrowings from English is removed in Leviant's version. In fact, the two tales Leviant translated as "Mr. Green Has a Job" and "The Story of a Greenhorn," both written in the United States, are so full of English borrowings that the standard authoritative edition of Sholem Aleichem's "Monologues" included (and still includes) an extensive glossary of transliterated Englishisms.⁶⁴ However, of nearly a *hundred* Englishisms in two brief stories, *only one* is set off

60 Ba'al-Makhshoves, "Sholem Aleichem [A Typology of His Characters]," *Prooftexts* 6, no 1 (1986) 14

61 Ruth R. Wisse, "Sholem Aleichem and the Art of Communication," *B. G. Randolph Lectures in Judaic Studies* (Syracuse, 1979), 3 2–3

62 Sol Gittelman, *From Shtetl to Suburbia: The Family in Jewish Literary Imagination* (Boston, 1978), pp 58, 132

63 Sholem Aleichem, "Mr. Green Has a Job," *Some Laughter, Some Tears: Tales from the Old World and the New*, trans. Curt Leviant (New York, 1968), pp 233–234

64 See Frieden, "Sholem Aleichem, Monologues of Mastery," p 33

as such in translation, with the neologism "allrightnik" ⁶⁵ Another story in Leviant's anthology, "Otherwise, There's Nothing New," takes the form of two letters, one written home to the old country by a father who complains how Americanized his children are becoming and how difficult they are to understand, and another letter back from the old country, complaining how the first letter was so full of Englishisms as to be almost incomprehensible ⁶⁶

What is a translator to do with these multilingual issues? To ignore them would be to ignore the historical forces that were dividing a community that had been bound together by Yiddish for nearly a thousand years Khone Shmeruk writes

The appearance of Americanisms in Yiddish in Sholem Aleichem's writings is meant not only to reflect the actual contact of Yiddish speakers with English, also, in his hands it becomes an element of humor, of language play, even providing the basis for comic situations In the last year of his life Sholem Aleichem achieved virtuosity in this bilingual playing with language in his monologues "Mister Green Has a Job" and "The Story of a Greenhorn" ⁶⁷

If we accept Shmeruk's statement, then to omit this "virtuosity" is a literary injustice I will use two pages from Tamara Kahana's translation of *Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son* to illustrate the extent to which it glosses the original

Mottel arrives in America, and soon begins to pepper his Yiddish with English words transliterated into Yiddish and set off by quotation marks These transliterated, quoted Englishisms proliferate, and eventually begin to appear without quotations as they become naturalized While this linguistic shift is given some cursory treatment in Kahana's translation, most of the examples are suppressed A single passage of the original text has ten Englishisms "peyper-baks-fektori," "delivert," "reyz" (a "raise" in salary), "bos," "gud boy," "ollrayt," "groseri-stor," "kostomers," "tap-flor," and "drog-stor" ⁶⁸ Kahana sets off only two "Boss" and "drugstore" ⁶⁹ The problem is, How

65 Sholem Aleichem, "Monologn" *Ale Verk fun Sholem Aleikhem* (New York 1944) 4 245-261, *Some Laughter Some Tears*, pp 233-236 243-248

66 Sholem Aleichem, *Some Laughter Some Tears* pp 237-242

67 Khone Shmeruk "Sholem Aleichem and America" *YIVO Annual* 20 (1991) 223

68 Sholem Aleichem, "Motl Peyse dem Khazns" *Ale Verk fun Sholem Aleikhem* (New York, 1944) 1 84-85

69 Sholem Aleichem, *Adventures of Mottel* pp 264-265

does one translate a text in which the characters have trouble with terms given in a foreign language *into that foreign language* (in this case English)?⁷⁰ The following passage is my translation of just such a moment in *Mottel*⁷¹

ברכה האָט פיינט אָט דאָס וואָרט, אַזוי ווי אַיין עהרליכער איד האָט פיינט חזיר.
נאָך אַ וואָרט איז פאַרהאַן, וואָס מײַן שוועגערין קאָן נישט אַריבערטראָגען. דאָס איז
אַ „ווינדע“. אַ ווינדע הייסט דאָ אַ פענסטער. זאָגט ברכה דערויף: „ווינד און וועה
זאָל זיין צו זיי“. . . היינט קאָן זי נישט הערען, אַז מע זאָגט „סטאַקינגס“. איהר וועט
קיינמאָל נישט פאַלען דערויף, אַז סטאַקינגס זענען זאָקען. אַדער, אַשטייגער, וואָס
וועט איהר זאָגען אויפֿן וואָרט „דישעס“? דאָכט זיך, אַז „פאַסודע“, זאָגט ברכה, איז
אַ סך שענער? אַדער וואָס קאָן זיין פשוט'ער פון אַ „לעפעל“? ניין. לוינט זיי נישט. ביי
זיי קומט אויס, אַז אַ לעפעל איז אַ „ספון“. נישט אומזיסט זאָגט ברכה אַ ווערטעל (זי
האָט זיך איהרע אייגענע ווערטלעך): „אַמעריקע איז אַ לאַנד, סטייך איז אַ מאַכל,
פאַרק איז אַ גאַפעל און איינגעלש איז אַ שפּראַך“ . . .

Brokhe hates that word the way an observant Jew hates pig There's another word that my sister-in-law can't abide, that's a "vinde" A "vinde" is what they call here a *fenster* Brokhe says regarding this, "Wind and woe should be to them" Today, she can't bear to hear "stockings" You'll never guess that "stockings" are *zokn* Or, for example, what would you say about the word "dishes"? Do you think, says Brokhe, that "posude" [Russian dishes] is a lot nicer? What could be simpler than a *left*? No It doesn't suit them With them it results that a *left* is a "spun" It's not for nothing that Brokhe says a proverb (She has her own proverbs) "Amerike is a land, steyk is a delicacy, fork is a *gopel*, and Eyngelesh is a language"

This passage was completely cut from Kahana's translation A translator should avoid taking textual liberties that are so extensive that they silence the artist's voice⁷¹ But the ramifications of such errors of omission become even greater if one considers that Sholem Aleichem's work is seen as "the

70 Sholem Aleichem, "Motl Peyst dem Khazns," pp 105–106

71 Especially when one considers the censorship and other difficult conditions that Sholem Aleichem faced during his career (cf A Mukdoni, "Sholom Aleichem as a Dramatic Writer," in *Melech Grafstein's Sholem Aleichem Panorama* ed Melech Grafstein [London, Ont 1948], p 222 and Shandler, "Reading Sholem Aleichem," p 306) For a detailed description of even more extreme cases of "adapting" and "improving" Sholem Aleichem's works, see Weitzner, *Sholem Aleichem in the Theatre*

quintessential test case for the issue of the translatability of Yiddish as a whole.”⁷²

All of this is central to the translation of the play *Mister Boym in Klozet*, which is also about the clash between opposing Yiddish cultures as represented by a brother and a sister. He is an Americanized Jew who liberally peppers his Yiddish with English, she is a “greenhorn” who complains that she can’t understand this foreign language English, all the while peppering her Yiddish with Russian. To ignore this issue by cutting it would eliminate the body of the play. I have therefore opted to maintain the multilingual distinctions of the Source Text as follows: (1) to translate the standard Yiddish into English except when it is being compared to English as in the passage above, in which case I transliterate the Yiddish into English; (2) to keep the Englishisms marked in English by *transliterating* them from their Yiddish transliterations back into English and setting them off with italic capitals, and (3) to use Reyes’s interlineal translation technique for the Russian.

In case that is a bit hard to follow, allow me to illustrate. Mrs. Boym’s first line in the play is, quite simply, English transliterated into Yiddish:⁷³

מיסעס בוים. וואָס איז די טראַבעל וויט יו?

I have transcribed this as: “*VAT IZ DI TROBEL VIT YU?*” This play contains several examples of English borrowings dropped into the middle of Yiddish sentences. Just one example would be פאַר וואָס דו איהר ניט געזאָגט, דאַט אי עס נאָט עט האומ? which I have translated as: “Why didn’t you tell her *DAT AY EM NAT ET HOM?*” Here, the languages are mixed, but not within a single clause. However, when Mr. Boym asks her where she has been, Mrs. Boym answers, זיך געדערעסט. איך האָב בוים.⁷⁴ Transliterated, this is *Ikh hob zikh gedrest*, which is grammatically correct Yiddish, only the root of the final word is English. The expression should be something like *Ikh hob zikh ongeton*. However, another common past participle ending is *-t*, as in “I brought,” *Ikh hob gebrengt*. So Mrs. Boym is taking an English verb, “to dress,” and conjugating it as if it were Yiddish. I translated this sentence as: “I was getting *GEDRESSED*” (despite the fact that Yiddish speakers would not do this in an English sentence).

72. Shandler, “Reading Sholem Aleichem,” p. 309.

73. Sholem Aleichem, “*Mister Boym in Klozet*,” p. 285.

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid.

Another recurring English-Yiddish melding is the treatment of the English verb "to move" as if it were Yiddish, as in the following two examples:⁷⁶

מיסטער בוים. באדארפט געווען זאגען, אז איך בין ניטא, אז איך בין
אוועקגעפאָהרען, אז איך האָב געמופט, אז איך וויל זי ניט זעהען – און דאָטס
אַלל!

מיסעס בוים. איך וועל ניט מופען!

Badarft geven zogn, az ikh bin nito, az ikh bin avekgeform, as ikh hob
gemuft, az ikh vil zi nit zen—un dats oll!

Ikh vel nit mufn!

In the first example, "move" is treated as a past participle, "hob gemuft," while in the second, "mufn" takes the grammatically correct infinitive form—grammatically correct, that is, if only the root were Yiddish!⁷⁷ I have translated these two sentences as:

You should have said that I am not here, that I've gone away, that I've
GEMUFT, that I don't want to see her, *UN DATS OLL*!
I won't *MUFN*!

Note how I have also retained the oral repetition, which is used throughout to indicate how Mr. Boym is driving himself frantic. (e.g., a few lines later, "You're right! You're right! What should I do? Hide me! Lock me up! I'll hide myself! Where can I hide?" Surely, in terms of content, this could be reduced to a single English sentence. But this is physical comedy, and the stage directions indicate that Mr. Boym is running "from one corner to the other, desperately."⁷⁸ The repetition is essential to the comedy.)

Finally Mr. Boym's "greenhorn" sister Shprintzel enters. Though she, too, has grammatically incorporated some Englishisms into her Yiddish, as in

אז די אלע „ביזנעסען", וואָס ער האָט מיר געמאַכט ביי אַהער, טויגען אויף כּפּרות...
Az di ale "biznesen" vos er hot mir gemakht biz aher, toygen oyf kapores.⁷⁹
All the *BIZNESEN* that he set me up in up to now are good for nothing.

76. Ibid., pp. 285–286.

77. For a detailed linguistic discussion of bilingual Yiddish-English borrowing patterns, see Rayfield, *Languages of a Bilingual Community*, chap. 3.

78. Sholem Aleichem, "Mister Boym in Klozet," pp. 286–287.

79. Ibid., p. 288.

in which the English root “business” is treated as a Yiddish word by the formation of its plural by adding *-en*. But her Yiddish is meant to have the flavor of the old country that her brother and sister-in-law have lost. The final word in the above sentence is Hebrew; Weinreich defines it as representing the “scapegoat in [a] pre-Yom Kippur atonement ceremony,”⁸⁰ certainly a culture-bound concept. This is an example of why it is nearly impossible to do justice to the multilingual nature of Yiddish in translation. The word, like Tevye’s Hebrew quotations from the Torah and commentaries, would have been understood by both old and new world Yiddish speakers—but as it is not a recent borrowing, I have translated it into the same standard English as the Yiddish. One would not treat “vocal,” “corrupt,” and “clandestine” in a twentieth-century English text as borrowings from French and Latin to be set off in translation. Perhaps glossing the Hebrew is a wrong choice. But one must draw the line somewhere. But where?

When Shprintzel first enters she asks⁸¹

שפרינצעל. ניטא איהם נאך, מין בראטישעק?
 מיסעס בוים. וואס הייסט דאס „בראטישעק“? זיצט!
 שפרינצעל. אזוי גיך האט איהר שוין פארגעסען אידיש? בראטישעק איז די
 טייטש א ברודער.

Shprintzel: He’s not here, my *bratishek* [Russian: brother]?

Mrs. Boym: What do you mean, “*bratishek*”? Sit!

Shprintzel: So you’ve forgotten Yiddish so fast? *Bratishek* means a *bruder* [Yiddish: brother].

This Russian/Yiddish pun could be translated as above. However, since a play is intended for presentation without footnotes, I feel the line must be rendered as: “So you’ve already forgotten Yiddish? *Bratishek* means a brother.” Something is always lost. I have tried to compensate for it elsewhere, as in “to *MUFN*”; “*MUFN*” is already in the infinitive, so the “to” should be superfluous; however, since we are not dealing with the grammar of a language, but with a translator’s interlanguage, I feel that “to *MUFN*” is justified.

80. Weinreich, *Modern Yiddish Dictionary*, p. 213.

81. Sholem Aleichem, “*Mister Boym in Klozet*,” p. 287.

At one point Shprintzel uses a complete Russian phrase, given in the original in transliterated Yiddish, *איז נע מאלע באבע חלאפאטע*,⁸² for which I have opted for Reyes's technique and rendered it as: "It's *ne mala babe khlopote* [Boy, the old lady has troubles!]."

There is only one place where I have left an entire Yiddish phrase to stand on its own, *אך און וועה איז מיר*,⁸³ which transliterates as *Okh un vey iz mir*. This means, quite literally, "Alas and woe is me," which nobody has been able to say seriously in English since Heathcliff disappeared from the pages of *Wuthering Heights*. But people really do say it in Yiddish. Besides, "Oy vey" is one of those Yiddishisms (like "schmuck," "chutzpa," "kvetch," or "klutz"—the only one included in *Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary*) that has made the reverse trip—into English, certainly no stranger to multilingual borrowings. In fact, if the nineteenth-century debaters of the Hebrew-Yiddish high-low rivalry had known more about English (few individuals would seriously call English's multilingual mixture "corrupt" or "grammarless" "jargon," charges that Yiddish withstood well into this century), it might have ended the debate and allowed those involved to explore more productive concerns.

The issue of translating multilingual texts must not be elided. How else is one to do justice to the social and political distinctions among the "Russified" Yiddish spoken by the rich heir, Solomon Fein in *The Jackpot*,⁸⁴ the "devilish" Germanic Yiddish of characters in I. L. Peretz and I. B. Singer,⁸⁵ and the "Americanized" Yiddish of the later works of Sholem Aleichem, to say nothing of the world of immigrant and postcolonial "interlanguage" texts that are being produced today? The classic writers were forging literary Yiddish as they went. It must sound new, not clichéd, because it "sounded" new to the readers, that is, in their experience of it as literature. We should let literal "foreignness" give us some of this newness.

Sholem Aleichem should not be seen as the chronicler of a dead culture in a dying language; his work also points toward continuity. Although much of his experience in the United States was in many ways just as bad as in Europe (poor critical reception of his plays, bad health, money troubles),⁸⁶ he still

82 Ibid., p. 289

83 Ibid., p. 288

84 Sholem Aleichem, *The Jackpot*, p. 260

85 Wisse, *A Shtetl*, p. 8

86 Cf. Anna Halberstam-Rubin, *Sholem Aleichem The Writer as Social Historian* (New York, 1989), pp. 13–15, 116; Weitzner, *Sholem Aleichem in the Theatre*, pp. 4, 7

saw hope in America for Jews—perhaps their only hope. After all, continuous change is better than death, isn't it? This is the transitional world American Jews come from. The work of Sholem Aleichem is a living transition that can illuminate our knowledge of both Yiddish and English. It is, in the words of Georg Lukács, "a process . . . the concrete precondition of the present."⁸⁷

87 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln, 1983), p 21

Appendix

MR. BOYM IN THE CLOSET (1915)

A Comedy in One Scene

by

Sholem Aleichem

Translated from the Yiddish by Kenneth Wishnia

By permission of the estate of Sholem Aleichem with considerable help from
Arnold Wishnia and Robert Hoberman

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CHARACTERS

Mr. Boym

Mrs. Boym

Shprintzel, Mr. Boym's "greenhorn" sister

Mr. Boym comes into his apartment, finds nobody there, tosses down his hat, and bangs his cane agitatedly on the table.

Mr. Boym: (*Loudly*) *HU IZ HOM?* (*Even louder*) *HU IZ HIER?*

(*Mrs. Boym enters, wearing fine clothes.*)

Mrs. Boym: *VAT IZ DI TROBEL VIT YU?*

Mr. Boym: Where were you, Jenny?

Mrs. Boym: I was getting *GEDRESSED*. What is it *DEN*?

Mr. Boym: Who's been here?

Mrs. Boym: *NOBADI*.

Mr. Boym: (*agitated*) A man from the *OFFIS* was supposed to have been here!

Mrs. Boym: Nobody's been here . . . Oh, yes! Your little sister was here . . . Shprintzel was here! . . .

Mr. Boym: (*getting even more agitated*) *TERRIBEL!* . . . Again? Why didn't you tell her *DAT AY EM NAT ET HOM?*

Mrs. Boym: How do you know that's not what I told her?

Mr. Boym: You should have said that I am not here, that I've gone away, that I've *GEMUFT*, that I don't want to see her, *UN DATS OLL!*

Mrs. Boym: A lot she listens when you speak to her! She searched through all the *ROUMS* looking for you! I thought I'd have a stroke!

Mr. Boym: The devil take it! Some sister! That Shprintzel. *ALBETSHYE* that she's going to drive me out of the city, and I'll have to *MUFN* over to another city! (*paces around agitatedly*) She's making me crazy! She's *SPOYLT* my *BIZNES!* . . . She's driving me into my grave!

Mrs. Boym: So who's to blame? If you didn't send her the boat tickets, she wouldn't have come!

Mr. Boym: (*running around*) Boat tickets! How was I supposed to know she'd be such a pain! I thought, she'll come, I'll set her up in a *BIZNES*, she'll settle with her *FEMILI*, become a *CITIZNER*, cost me a few *DOLER—UN DATS OLL!* Go figure, that the *VUMEN* would bring me so much *TROBEL* that I'd have to *MUFN*—that we'd have to *MUFN*, *MISSEZ BOYM*, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Mrs. Boym: (*with a melody*) I won't *MUFN!* I'm *OLLRAYT!* (*The bell rings.*) It's her! . . .

Mr. Boym: (*grabs his head*) It's her? *TERRIBEL!* I can't take this! She's *IMPOSIBEL!* I'll make up a story! I'll commit suicide! (*He grabs his hat, wants to run to the door. The bell rings furiously.*)

Mrs. Boym: Where are you running to? You want to run into her, nose to nose?

Mr. Boym: You're right! You're right! What should I do? Hide me! Lock me up! I'll hide myself! Where can I hide? (*He runs around from one corner to the other one, desperately.*) I'll wait in the *KLOZET* until she goes . . . I beg you, Jenny, don't make any long *KONVERSAYSHONS* with her! Tell her: *AY EM NAT HOM—UN DATS OLL!* . . .

(*Mr. Boym jumps into the closet. Mrs. Boym gets ready to grab Shprintzel when she comes in. Shprintzel enters, unexpectedly dressed in the American style, with a fine hat. She looks all around the apartment.*)

Shprintzel: He's not here, my *bratishek* [brother]?"

Mrs. Boym: What do you mean, "*bratishek*"? Sit!

Shprintzel: So you've forgotten Yiddish so fast? *Bratishek* means a brother. (*She sits.*) Some brother! I thought that I'd come all the way over here, and he would make me happy. What a wonderful thing: a rich brother, and in America even, a free country—it should only burn! And the people—they couldn't compare to our lowest water-carrier! And their language—*POTAYTES*, *TOMAYTES*, *KITSHEN*, and *TSHIKEN*, they should be kidnapped! A *keler* is a *BAYSMENT*, a *boydem* a *RUF*, *YARD* is a *hoyf*, *STRIT* is a *gass*, and *GABITSH* is *mist*. Nu, how can it be good? If only I'd lived out my years without ever knowing this country! But he *nasyadet* [sat on] me, my *bratishek*, and started hammering me with letters, letter after letter telling me I should come over to his America, to his golden land, where he will make me happy. . . . And

*Bracketed translations are of Russian words.

I, like an idiot, let myself be talked into casting aside such a land, with such people, with leaving behind such a business, a golden business, a *shmaltz*-pit, an inn, with a dining hall, with a bar room, one way or another, for better or for worse, we had bread to eat! Only in the last few years did things get bad, because they started chasing us out and there was no one to stay at the inn and nothing to buy, otherwise, I would have been a czarina! If it hadn't been for the pogrom, would I have even budged from that spot? I wouldn't even have looked at it, what my *bratishek* wrote to me about good fortune, that a world was opening for my children, all roads are free. . . . It doesn't even come close! Back home my Moyshe, even though they don't admit anybody, nevertheless finished a bookkeeping course by mail from Yankev Mark's in Lubovitsch, so I figured that here my brother would certainly find him a position with Yankel Schiff, or with Rockenfellern, or in some big office. . . . And my daughter, who in Russia they wouldn't accept into high school, even so was learning at home sewing and dressmaking also by mail—you'd think he'd at least *pristroyet* [fix up] her a position somewhere in a *DEPARTMENT*. So who? What? When we come, he's not here. Big deal, every week he sends me a *TSHEK*! "Wages" he gives me! *Okh un vey iz mir*, that I even came here! (*She cries*.) My mother should rise out of the grave and take a look at her Shprintzel, how she lives from *TSHEKN* and from wages . . . (*dries her eyes*) An only daughter I was . . . Among eight sons—dogcatchers, hoodlums, boorish slobs—and all together only one daughter . . . (*pause*) If, for example, I might have at least some kind of establishment. . . . He promises me, that *bratishek* of mine, after the holidays he'll seek and find another *BIZNES* for me. I don't want any *BIZNES*! Do me a favor with your *BIZNES*—I want a *GESHEFT*, a real business, not a *BIZNES*! . . . All the *BIZNESEN* that he set me up in up to now are good for nothing. . . . He puts me outside so I should sell kerchiefs! . . . Back home they don't buy any kerchiefs in the street! . . . Or does he want I should be *PEDLEN* tea, wine, and cigars? Back home they don't *PEDELT* any tea, wine, and cigars! Or, for example, he goes and rents me an apartment, so I should sublet it to the neighbors. I should become, that means, a *LENDLORDIKHE*. It's *ne mala babe khlopote* [Boy, the old lady has troubles!]*—*So I come asking for the rent, and they throw me down the stairs! What's the story? The story is, that I talk to them in our language! Of course, that's why I left from dear Russia—it should only burn!—to come here, a poor widow, with orphan children, in order that I should convert to your language! (*Mrs. Boym can't repress a smile.*) You laugh? Sure, you can

afford to laugh, you who live in such a good place (*gesturing around with her hand*) with such mirrors (*she looks at herself in the mirrors*) with a piano, with a gramophone, with closets . . . (*She goes to the closet where Mr. Boym is hiding.*) And your closets are probably full of every luxury, a real eyeful . . . (*She opens the curtain to the closet, and Mr. Boym is discovered. All three remain frozen.*)

Slow Curtain

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