

Interview with

By Jordan Osterer

University of Ottawa student Jordan Osterer interviewed Yiddish translators Seymour Mayne and Pierre Anctil as part of the course “Yiddish Canada in the Twentieth Century,” part of the Vered Jewish Canadian Studies Program, University of Ottawa. Following is a shortened version of the interview with Seymour Mayne, along with Jordan’s introduction. We will publish the interview with Pierre Anctil in the next issue. – Eds.

The Yiddish language, most often associated with the *shtetlekh* of Eastern Europe, suffered immensely as a result of the Holocaust. With the eradication of so many of its speakers, the future of Yiddish appeared grim after the Second World War, but a renewed interest in the language has allowed for its continued survival, with many scholars taking an active interest in the translation of Yiddish literature. While the number of native Yiddish speakers is dwindling, the language and literature have attracted the attention of academics who seek to understand its role in Jewish history and identity. Some, such as Professors Seymour Mayne and Pierre Anctil at the University of Ottawa, have devoted academic initiatives to the translation process, working closely with Yiddish literature to perpetuate the legacy of the language.

Translating from Yiddish poses a number of challenges. The Yiddish language is a culmination of the tendencies and characteristics accumulated since its inception and continuing throughout its evolution. As the language evolved, Yiddish became increasingly viable and significant in a multitude of areas within Jewish life, and unique expressions eventually formed. These subtle intricacies are particularly vexing to readers who are unfamiliar with the distinct history of Ashkenazi Jewry, and provide a formidable challenge to translators. In their interviews, Professors Mayne and Anctil offered insight into how the quirks and traits of the Yiddish language can be successfully transferred to another language. It is the responsibility of a translator to not only comprehend Yiddish terminology, but also, in so doing, ensure that the flavour of the language is maintained in translation.

J.O. When you were growing up, what role did Yiddish play in your life?

S.M. Yiddish was the *lingua franca* of my family, the central language of communication in our home. My father grew up first in Ukraine and then in Montreal, and my mother’s home was in Bialystok—she was from a Russian Jewish family who migrated westwards after the failed 1905 revolution in Czarist Russia. That is not to say that Yiddish was the only language used in the house—English, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, were other languages spoken in daily exchanges, but Yiddish was the primary tongue.

J.O. Among your friends or contemporaries, did Yiddish play a similar role?

S.M. It depends on the family. For some there was a Yiddish-centred school, but as a result of unusual coincidences I ended up attending a school that put Hebrew above Yiddish. Early on in our primary school the principal took Yiddish off the curriculum. I went to a Zionist Hebrew-centred school which was supported both by the secularist Labour Zionists and the national-religious Zionists. The school’s goal was to educate young Canadian Jewish students to become acculturated to Canada while learning about their vast Jewish and Judaic heritage, all the time appreciating the renewal of the Jewish people in the new State of Israel.

When I was learning *Sifrut*, Hebrew literature, in high school, we studied Sholem Aleichem but not in the original Yiddish; we read him in Hebrew translation. Yiddish was in the curriculum for a year or two in elementary school and then it was dropped. Yiddish may have been demoted by my school but not by the family, nor by the community. Everywhere in Montreal, wherever I went, Yiddish was the language spoken by most Ashkenazi Jews—of Ukrainian, Romanian, Russian, and Polish backgrounds.

J.O. Is your old neighbourhood still the same now?

S.M. The neighbourhood I grew up in has changed. The Jews moved out and went elsewhere, so the people who live there now are of mixed backgrounds—it is presently a multicultural neighbourhood. It was not a multicultural neighbourhood when I grew up there—the Jews were 85% or more of the population. There were small Irish and Polish pockets, and within a block or two there was a neighbourhood that was all French-speaking. Unfortunately there

Seymour Mayne

was not the most tender of relationships between the French working class and the Jewish working class—there was a lot of prejudice. That was in the 1940s—it is not the same today.

J.O. *What prompted you to focus on Yiddish in an academic sense?*

S.M. First of all, I enjoy Yiddish. Yiddish has a certain saltiness, an exuberance of expression that I enjoyed when I entered into conversations with my parents, with my aunts, with my grandparents. Yiddish always provided a certain charged advantage and I love the flavour of the language. Academically, I read some Yiddish writers in English translation. Early on, as a teenager, I became a member of the Jewish Public Library and I took out all kinds of books. I won a book award in Grade 7 and the prize was a collection of Sholem Aleichem's short fiction in English. I read Sholem Aleichem and then turned to I. J. Singer, the older brother of Isaac Bashevis Singer. His novels were available in English and I read those I could find at the Jewish Public Library and also the works of the controversial Yiddish writer Sholem Asch. I read his blockbuster novels because they were translated into English. And then, slowly but surely during the 1960s, there began an emergence in translation of more Yiddish poetry and fiction rendered by a small number of pioneer translators.

Another key factor was that I encountered Mr. David Rome, the director of the Jewish Public Library, and one of the librarians there who was the spouse of the Yiddish writer Melech Ravitch. I first met Ravitch at the Library when I began to publish poetry in English. I also met the poet Ida Maze around 1960. There was a group of Yiddish writers who used to meet regularly at the Jewish Public Library, and even though I was a high school student, they invited me to join them. But I had just begun to publish in national journals and I think their plan was to make me understand that perhaps I should consider writing in Yiddish. I had no formal training in Yiddish—Yiddish was there and I could speak and read it,

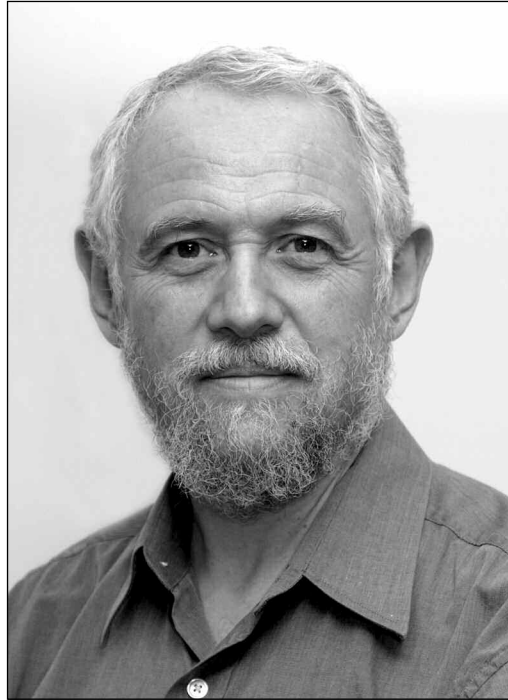


Photo: Robert Lacombe, University of Ottawa

but I had no learned command of grammar. I wrote in English even though I was studying Hebrew in high school.

In a normal day when I was in school, I would get up in the morning, my mother would throw some Yiddish expressions at me about something she disapproved of—maybe I didn't comb my hair the way she wanted me to. I'd hear Yiddish and I would go out the door and get on the bus and hear English and French, and then I'd come to school and attend Hebrew classes. Then I would go to English classes, French classes, and on to Latin. Later, I'd return home and I would hear Yiddish again and I'd go visit my grandparents who lived downstairs and I would also often hear Ukrainian. Every

day I would negotiate three, four, five languages and I learned to be a multi-amphibious linguistic creature—but it wasn't a big deal. When I got to university at age 17, I added another language to the pool, Spanish—I love Spanish poetry.

Academically, then, I did not study Yiddish. When I was still in high school I met another great Yiddish poet, Avraham Sutzkever, who arrived from Israel to give a reading at the Jewish Public Library, and little did I know then that I was destined to translate a whole collection of his poems twenty years later. A turning point was when I was a graduate student at the University of British Columbia and I ran into a lecturer in the department, Seymour Levitan, and we talked about the problem that so much Yiddish poetry had not yet been translated and especially Yiddish Canadian literary works. There was a Yiddish reading circle in Vancouver that I attended from time to time, and Seymour and I decided together that it would be timely to tackle the translation of some Yiddish Canadian writers. Both of us had a similar passion and love for the poetry of Rokhl Korn, and I had known Melech Ravitch so I wanted to render some of his work. In the early 1970s, I started translating poetry into English and making the poems available to an English literary audience in Canada—Jewish

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and non-Jewish. So my choice was dictated by my literary vocation rather than my earlier Jewish education.

J.O. *I know you have focused on particular poets—are there specific characteristics about these particular people that drew you?*

S.M. First of all, it was coincidence. I met Melech Ravitch and only years later, on the centenary of his birth, I was keen to do a chapbook selection—I had translated some of his works years earlier. I had met Sutzkever, and many years later, one of the key Sutzkever scholars was a Montrealer who was then teaching at McGill—Ruth Wisse, and one day I visited her and she said, “All these ghetto poems that he wrote, I know you’re into poetry, I think you’ll like them—why don’t you translate them?” She gave me some help and we went through a lot of texts together and then I went on sabbatical to Israel. I looked up Sutzkever in Tel Aviv, visited him and pulled out my translations in progress and asked him some questions. Interestingly, we did not discuss his Yiddish works in Yiddish, but in Hebrew—I was far more at home talking to Sutzkever in Hebrew about his Yiddish poems than in Yiddish. He and I spent a lot of time together. I asked him a lot of questions about the diction and phrasing, and at the end I produced a book of his ghetto poems in translation which had a wide circulation. The book came out in 1981 and has shown up in many bibliographies.

I never met J.I. Segal, but I heard his name mentioned when I was young—my grandfather used to read the *Keneder Adler*, where the poet served as editor. I always had his name at the back of my mind. I found a few of his poems and decided to translate them because while they were published in the 1930s, they were very similar to Imagist English poems published in the same decade in Canada. It’s not as if I had a literary plan in mind. All through this period I was still

working as a poet, a writer and a critic, but not especially a Yiddish-language one, and on the side, with the help of some other people, especially my collaborator in translation, Rivka Augenfeld of Montreal, I translated a selection of Yiddish poems. It is a small body of work, but these poems have been very widely anthologized. I have translated perhaps, all in all, a few dozen Yiddish poems, but they have been published in 35 or more anthologies, and readers and scholars keep turning to them, so I am flattered that they think these translations continue to have literary merit.

J.O. *Yiddish has expressions that are unique and may not translate well to an English readership. Did you face similar obstacles when you were translating?*

S.M. Yes, there are problems, not only linguistically but also with literary convention. Each literature has an idiom and an aesthetic of its own. There are parallels, and in the early 20th century, most modern literatures—and Yiddish—went through a tumultuous change, from a closed 19th century style to a more modernist poetics where the form would be more consistent with the subject and tone of the respective work.

Sometimes Yiddish poetry is more philosophical and discursive. It talks more. English poetry in the 20th century tends to be more understated, so how do you translate someone like Ravitch, who writes very extensive philosophical poems full of abstractions and general nouns—how do you translate his work into English? Well, you read through his writings and pick the poems that will render themselves better into English and will appeal to the tastes and traditions of 20th-century English poetry. I had to make choices—I didn’t choose poems that I thought wouldn’t translate well. Many modern Yiddish poets use rhyme, and I didn’t want to reproduce the rhyme scheme just because it’s there and then turn the poem into a stilted version of itself so that it read filtered like a translation. Each translated poem should be a poem in its own right in English—it needs to leap seamlessly from one language to the other and get recreated into the idiom and language of the English translation. And so Sutzkever was an excellent choice. His poems were written during World War II—he was with the Partisans in the forest and what empowers his poems is the passion of the speech and the resonance of the imagery. I had more difficulty with his philosophical poems.

When you translate Yiddish you face the same challenge as when you translate Hebrew. Yiddish poetry draws upon two basic cultural resources, the canon of sacred text—the *Tanach* [Hebrew Bible] and post-*Tanach* writings. The second major influence is the language of liturgy—



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prayer—that every male and female would have heard all their lives, attending synagogue regularly. Hebrew, for example, is more aligned to Aramaic, but Yiddish is not, it is Germanic. So the problem is how to translate Hebrew and Yiddish poems that are both biblical and liturgical, into modern English—that is the translator's constant challenge.

J.O. *Have you ever taken it upon yourself to create an original work of Yiddish poetry?*

S.M. I have scribbled a few short poems over the years, but I would never let anyone read them, nor would I publish them. I have written more in Hebrew than Yiddish, but I have enough *seykhel* not to let these efforts appear in print.

J.O. *Are there specific works that would never translate well, no matter how many hours you devote to studying them?*

S.M. I could not make that generalization. I do know that writers whose creative genius lies within the play of language of their own tongue, the writers whose works lie very much within the matrix of their own language and its puns and sound plays, these are the hardest to translate into another language because the idiom, the construction, the figures of speech, the sounds, cannot be easily reproduced into something parallel in another language. For example, in Polish there is a marvelous texture of sound that is so hard to render into English, especially if the talent of the particular poet is not in the narrative, not in the imagery, but in the play of words. I wouldn't give up and if I had another lifetime I would be more systematic about translating Yiddish and Hebrew poetry more extensively.

J.O. *How do you think the translation process is keeping the language alive?*

S.M. A language to be alive is a language that people speak every day—it's the language that they write their grocery lists in, it's the language they use to flirt with each other, it's the language with which they open their hearts to each other, it's the language in which they negotiate car deals and property transfers. Unfortunately, I don't think that the translation of literature helps to keep that language vital, and the problem with Yiddish is that its population base was destroyed in the Holocaust—the *Shoah*—and now it has become more of a scholarly rather than a literary language. I don't see among the Hassidim, who speak Yiddish because they don't want to speak Hebrew, that they will be a fulcrum for change, so translation at least keeps the cultural vessels of Yiddish literature alive and floating, as it were. Translation means that people can open up and read the wonderful short stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer, the great poems of Sutzkever, the wonderful lyrics of Rokhl Korn—this is important, to be able at least to read these works in translation and get a good sense of the insights and literary vision of these writers. Unfortunately, Yiddish is going to be a lot like Latin and ancient Greek—a literary culture that is going to stay alive through study and translation.

J.O. *Do you have any closing thoughts about the future of Yiddish?*

S.M. Unfortunately I am not hopeful for the future for Yiddish. More and more young people like yourself, like my daughter, study Yiddish, read Yiddish, but your language is English and if you decide to live in the Jewish homeland, Hebrew will serve as your day-to-day tongue. A lot of us who write make an impact on the English we use. You can hear the echo of Yiddish voices in many contemporary English-language Jewish writers over the past few generations in North American and British

writing. Unless a miracle happens and all these Hassidic sects who use Yiddish because they don't want to speak everyday Hebrew, the *lashon kodesh*—the holy tongue—unless some great cultural revolution occurs among them and they say, "*Chevreh*, we speak Yiddish so let's go to the library and take out all those books. Let's look at all these writers. OK, so they are *apikorsim* (secular Jews) but we should read all these fabulous Yiddish authors." That would be a wonderful thing, but the likelihood of that happening is very dim. Yiddish is one of those languages which is encapsulated in time, and no longer has a living space except for those who want to enter into it because of a scholarly choice. There will be writers and translators who will keep going back and saying, let's translate more. There are still powerful works that have not appeared in English. I would love to see a big anthology of all the Yiddish writers in Canada, highlighting their best work. It could be done by a team of translators and editors—it would be a marvelous legacy for the next generation. Translation is the way to keep Yiddish alive for the future. ♦



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