

**In the Gurney of Life:
Translating Janek Wasserman's Holocaust Memoir
A Proposal for a Thesis in Literary Translation
Department of English
Bar Ilan University**

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במריצת החיים:

סיפורו של ניצול השואה ינק וסרמן בתרגום

הצעת מחקר לתזה יוצרת תרגום ספרותי

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

פרנסין מקבילי

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מנחה: דר' דניאל פלדמן

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Aims and General Description

This thesis will consist of a translation from Hebrew of a 120-page excerpt of a first-person account of the Holocaust experiences of Janek Wasserman, a Polish Jew who survived the concentration camps at Plaszow, Mauthausen, Gussen, and Guns kirchen. The 2013 biographical text was originally written by Yigal Shahar, a retired high school principal, in Wasserman's voice. Shahar heard Wasserman's story firsthand when the two traveled together to Poland on a school trip that Shahar was leading. He found Wasserman's story so compelling that he decided to commit it to writing; similarly awed, I hope to bring Wasserman's story to a wider English-speaking audience. The memoir focuses on a key atrocity during the Holocaust of which there is almost no record due to the few witnesses who survived to tell about it. The event was the exhumation and incineration of 10,000 Jewish bodies at Hujowa Gorka on the outskirts of the Plaszow concentration camp in summer 1944. Some of these victims were local Krakow Jews while others were brought to Plaszow from Slovakia and Hungary to be killed even as the extermination camp system collapsed. The book encompasses the whole of Wasserman's riveting experience from small Galician town to liberation by American GIs in Austria, but it is his harrowing memory of serving with his father on the gurney brigade at Hujowa Gorka that is the heart of this memoir and the impetus for the proposed project of translation.

Conceptual Background

In 2013 Yad Vashem published a memoir in its “Guf rishon” series relating the story of Janek Wasserman. Here, one might think, was yet another first-person memoir by a Holocaust survivor describing the usual stations of Holocaust agony: ghetto, camp, death march, liberation. But the book, *In the Gurney of Life*, surprises by offering almost none of that. First, it is written not by a survivor but by a retired educator named Yigal Shahar who writes in Wasserman's voice. (Shahar met the charismatic Wasserman during a school trip to Poland and was struck by his persona and story.) Second, the text focuses not on “typical” Shoah experiences but on a particularly shocking, brutal, and almost entirely forgotten event: in 1944, as the Soviet Red Army closed in, the Nazis ordered the exhumation of an astounding 10,000 murdered corpses haphazardly buried on the outskirts of the infamous Plaszow concentration camp near Krakow and destruction of the bodies. This was horrifying, gruesome work, and the very essence of repulsive, tactile, person-by-person mass atrocity meant to obliterate every last trace of the killing. This type of activity is associated mostly with the Sonderkommandos of the death camps, almost none of whom survived. Yet the subject of this memoir, Janek Wasserman, endured this work and lived to tell about it. The vitality with which he recounts his ordeal and the precision with which he describes this nearly forgotten atrocity just outside one of the great centers of prewar Jewry makes this book an invaluable source that deserves to reach a broader, English-speaking audience.

In terms of conceptual challenges, the density of extreme events depicted in this text and its overlaying of multiple voices and mother tongues will make this translation technically and emotionally difficult. The experiences Wasserman recounts begin with the onset of war in his native Slomniki in western Galicia. Wasserman describes the arrival of Nazi forces in his town and the first

deportations. Slomniki is a mid-sized regional center in southwestern Poland about fifteen miles from Krakow, and Wasserman describes the prewar Jewish community with its diversity of languages and inhabitants. Some Jews spoke Yiddish, others Polish, others German. The Hebrew original of the text merely notes the existence of these languages but somewhat flattens the linguistic richness of the town life. I plan to play with the English syntax in this section in order to convey the sense that my translation represents yet another refraction of various native tongues spoken by people who were targeted for destruction simply for being Jewish.

The account proceeds chronologically and continues with Wasserman's imprisonment in the Julag I subsection of the Plaszow concentration camp, erected in spring 1943 to house Jews from Krakow and its environs after the liquidation of the local ghetto. Even by Nazi standards, Plaszow was a brutal camp. Commanded by the infamous Amon Goeth, the camp was the setting for especially sadistic and vicious acts that are depicted in Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*. Wasserman describes how he and his father shared rations and supported each other and their dwindling number of friends from Slomniki through repeated waves of deportations to Auschwitz and Belzec.

The grim narrative reaches a violent climax in the spring of 1944, when the tide begins to turn against the Germans. Goeth orders an especially brutal team of SS officers to create a team of Jewish inmates to exhume and destroy the remains of the murdered, nearly all Jews, at an old fort left over by the Austrians from World War I on the edge of the camp. No one knows how many bodies lie murdered in the trenches around the fort. It turns out that there are over 10,000. The Jewish prisoners who are organized into this special "Ausgrabenkommando," or exhumation squad, participate in one of the most dehumanizing, dangerous, back-breaking, and soul-crushing events of the Holocaust. They come to call the hill where the atrocity transpires Hujowa Gorka. Most of them are killed near the end of the operation in September 1944. Wasserman survives all this and describes it with powerful spirit and

drive. His account, which ends with his survival and liberation in Mauthausen and its sub-camps in Austria, has few parallels either in Holocaust history or literature. Translating this untold story will require sensitivity, ingenuity, and resolve.

My translation of *In the Gurney of Life* will depend primarily on a close reading and careful translation of the original text, written by Yigal Shahar based on Wasserman's testimony. I will also consult other Holocaust memoirs, including translations of classic memoirs, such as Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* and Elie Wiesel's *Night*, as well as testimonial works by survivors of Plaszow and the Auschwitz Sonderkommandos. Emotionally demanding and technically challenging, this thesis will ask me to meet the standards established by the English translations of vivid eyewitness accounts written by members of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando such as Filip Muller in *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, Shlomo Venezia in *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando*, and Zalman Gradowski in his posthumously published diary (see Suchoff). These texts transcribe the unfathomable horrors that their authors saw every day and are relevant to the account Wasserman offers. I will also base my translation on the few other accounts of Hujowa Gorka, such as Nathan Offen's and Joseph Bau's testimonies, which mention Hujowa Gorka.

The events that Wasserman witnessed at Hujowa Gorka, like the barbaric Aktion 1005 at the end of Operation Reinhard and the events recorded by the Auschwitz Sonderkommandos, were intended to erase all record of a massive crime and the lives it ended. Wasserman is one of the few voices to have survived this specific part of the Holocaust, and Shahar records it in faithful, urgent, and exact language. By translating that memory into English this thesis will make Wasserman's unique perspective available to a much wider audience who will benefit from knowledge of this unique man and the horrific events he saw and survived.

Shape of the Project

The thesis will translate roughly two-thirds (120 pages) of Shahar's original text, including the opening chapters on Wasserman's memories of the start of the war in Slomniki, the initial months he spent with his father in Julag I in Plaszow, and, especially, his months toiling in Hujowa Gorka exhuming and incinerating thousands of bodies of murdered Jews. I will condense or omit the later chapters in which Wasserman describes his transport away from Plaszow first to Mauthausen, and then to Gussen, and finally to Gunskirchen where he was ultimately liberated by American GIs. I will, however, include in my thesis a translation of the text's epilogue chapter in which Wasserman reflects on his survival and speaks with resolve about the future, his undiminished will to live, and his desire for readers to remember those who perished.

The thesis will open with an introductory essay providing an overview of the historical context of Hujowa Gorka and Wasserman's experience. This historical overview may include maps and visual representations of the sites that the text describes. I will also refer to the harrowing images from Spielberg's recreation of the Hujowa Gorka atrocity in a brief but devastating scene portraying the burning of bodies in *Schindler's List* (James). The introduction will also discuss any special linguistic issues or literary problems that arise during the course of the translation such as problems posed by dealing with the polyphonic diversity of the languages that the characters speak in the text speak. Although Shahar records everything in Hebrew, the original events the text depicts occurred in German, Polish, and Yiddish and the witnesses remember their experiences in those language. I will claim that Shahar's Hebrew book is already a translation that I will translate into English. The introductory essay will also consider the issue of accuracy in translation and its pertinence to a work that focuses on the Nazis' attempt to destroy all evidence of their unimaginable crimes. Wasserman witnessed a notable part of that effort to erase, obliterate, and destroy memory. Accuracy and precision

in language, therefore, carry historical import in carrying out this project of literary translation.

My proposed work plan will be to base myself off of the Hebrew text and initially to draft an accurate literal translation that closely follows the word-to-word meaning of Shahar's book. I will consult dictionaries and comparable translated works of Holocaust memoir by Sonderkommando survivors (Muller, Venezia, and Suchoff) to determine how to render difficult, local, or foreign terms that have no clear translation. I will also confer with the author, Yigal Shahar, in personal conversation and private correspondence to pose questions and to ensure that my translation is as accurate and faithful as possible.

One unique aspect that I will confront in the course of translating the memoir is that the text speaks in a first-person voice that seems authentic, even though it is a construct. The book was written by Shahar, a third-person, outside author, but speaks in Wasserman's voice. In attempting to preserve this unique chain of mediated voices and perspectives in translation, I will work to find a narrative voice that conveys the visceral immediacy of the narrative without betraying the multiple creative hands through which it has passed including Wasserman, who told the story, Shahar, who researched and recorded it, and I, who will translate it. This creative chain also reflects the story's transmission through a series of languages, since Wasserman's experiences and memories were in Polish, Yiddish, and German; Shahar wrote Wasserman's book in Hebrew; and I seek to translate it to English. Translation matters are thus part and parcel of this unusual work of Holocaust memory and an inherent part of what I expect to reflect upon when I draw the project to a close.

Translation Theory and Methodology

Translation is an art, not a science. David Bellos, a veteran translator and scholar of translation, writes that translation cannot be right or wrong “in the manner of a school quiz or a bank statement. A translation is more like a portrait in oils.” Instead, Bellos says, a good translation “provides for some community an acceptable match for an utterance made in a foreign tongue.” In the course of this thesis I expect to confront words, ideas, experiences, and even emotions that are utterly foreign to me (and to my readers) and which may have no exact parallel in English. But I will seek to find the proper balance of descriptive language, sentence structure, and emotional register to convey the unfathomable and appalling Holocaust experiences of Janek Wasserman into English. I will rely on the translation model that Bellos proposes that calls on the translator to base her methodology on a clear understanding of the intended audience. No one reading my thesis will have experienced anything close to what Wasserman survived. My thesis, therefore, will be as much a work of reconstructing his memories, experiences, and utterances for contemporary readers as it will be a project of faithful linguistic translation. In that respect, I am merely taking Shahar's initial project of narrative “translation” one step further by rendering the book in English. I cannot expect to capture Wasserman's ordeal in its entirety, but, as Bellos says, “no translation can be expected to be like its source in more than a few selected ways.” If my thesis can faithfully recreate some of Wasserman's memories and evoke some of his intense will to transmit his story, then I will be satisfied to have achieved my goals.

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