

A Translation of a Forgotten Israeli Author

A Proposal for a Thesis in Literary Translation

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Aims and General Description

My thesis will be a translation of short stories written in the Hebrew by Asher Barash, a Ukrainian-Israeli author, including the lesser-known volume *In the Shadow of Good People: A Medley of Stories from the Rudorfer Stories* – בצל אנשים טובים: מחברות סיפורים מסיפורי רודורפר, published in Israel in 1949. Barash's stories are unique in that they are based in the Eastern-European *shtetl* and imbued with the Jewish religious culture pervasive to the time, yet also reflect the *Haskalah* movement- the Jewish enlightenment. This paradox is given voice in Barash's unique style of writing, where realism meets a nostalgic past, and German literature meets antiquated Hebrew with unintentional Biblical echoes.

My aim is to give voice to an author whose ideals and educational background will not be unfamiliar to the modern reader. Yet I strive to be faithful to this voice: to showcase its particular beauty and preserve the context in which it was written, while still creating a collection of short stories accessible and palatable to a wide audience of readers.

Conceptual Background

Asher Barash was born on March 16, 1889, in the city of Łopatyn, Ukraine, which was then in Galicia, Poland, and part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As was the norm in Eastern-European shtetls, Barash's childhood education was acquired primarily through *cheder*, a boys-only elementary school, where he studied in Yiddish but was taught Hebrew and basic Jewish texts like Bible, Mishna and Talmud by a *melamed*- the generic name of the Jewish teacher. However, he also studied in a government-run school where he learned Polish and German, which reflects on the uniqueness of Barash's educational background even as a child.

It was there he became enraptured with Polish literature as well as with Hebrew literature associated with the Jewish Enlightenment movement – the *Haskalah* movement – and modern Hebrew literature. By the time he was thirteen years of age he began writing short stories and plays, mainly in Yiddish and Hebrew, and when he was fourteen, he had small collections of his stories copied out into notebooks and bound by him.

It is this nexus of traditional Jewish Eastern-European language and culture, together with the use of modern Hebrew and ideologies relating to Haskalah and Zionism, that I will explore in my translation of Barash's works. I am curious as to how this unique combination and subsequent language register gives voice to this specific time and place in Jewish history.

In the stories I intend to translate, the tone seems overtly to be quietly nostalgic. The characters are common characters of the shtetl- a boy attending

cheder, a widowed woman living with her disabled daughter, the unmarried beautiful young woman waiting for a matchmaker to make her match. However, as one continues reading these stories, there is an awareness of a world whose seams are coming apart, disintegrating into a newer, more captivating world of modern ideologies. Barash's love of language and literature is clear right from the start, with volumes of German prose, poetry, and plays displayed prominently right in the first story's exposition, and lines of Heine quoted in blocks; there is a reverence for the Arts and for the monarchy. His use of modern Hebrew echoes the emerging usage of its time- many influences of biblical Hebrew and proverbs, Jewish liturgy, as well as modern sensibilities, education, and leaning towards the outside secular world.

The themes of these short stories match the tone, with some nostalgia and wistfulness towards the shtetl. However, there is no desire to go back to the past in these stories. There is a clear vision of a brighter future with a clear trajectory, where literature, science, and love blossom together and create a new entity of existence for the Jews of the shtetl. Indeed, Yaakov the narrator is urged by a kerchief-wearing embroideress to study and apply himself not only to Jewish studies, but also to general knowledge and secular literature. Such rhetoric would have been unsavory in work by Shai Agnon, for example. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, in his well-researched exploration of the shtetl, *The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe*, expounds on the notion of the Jewish shtetl being part of the greater ideal of Jerusalem and its innate holiness, by examining one of Agnon's stories, where "everybody knew that there was a spark of Jerusalem in the shtetl" (302). Thus we see the contrasting attitudes; Agnon connects his stories to the past, to ancient Jerusalem, while Barash stretched out to the enlightened future.

Procedures and Methodologies

The language and register of Asher Barash's writing presents a unique challenge to me as the translator. The average reader, reading this antiquated style of writing, in addition to the setting of these stories in the European shtetl, would immediately place the style as similar to Shai Agnon and other contemporaries of Barash. Biblical, Talmudic, and liturgical references abound, making it sound almost like a religious text to modern ears and sensibilities. Here I followed David Bellos advice in *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* where he argues that translating style "is better done by taking a slight distance from the text and allowing its underlying patterns to emerge by their own force in the process of rewriting in a second language" (290). In my translation, I strived to let Barash's voice be heard beyond the changes of syntax, sentence length and structure necessary to literary translation.

Particularly since once you put aside the language and listen to the narrative, to the characters, and ideologies espoused, it is clear this is an entirely different kind of text. The language is beautiful in its precision and in its expansive grasp of Jewish tradition. As Mark Polizzoti eloquently articulates in his translation manifesto *Sympathy for the Traitor*, answering his question of whether translation is possible, "Language['s] . . . real meanings often hover in the spaces between utterances, in the movement generated by particular arrangements of words, associations, and hidden references. This is what literature does . . . and that's what translation can do as well" (7).

I aim to translate these texts as closely as possible to the original, retaining the sense of a world whose slow-paced rhythm and social etiquette are no longer in existence. I do not want this piece to become a watered-down, modernized version of a masterful piece of literature; I have no desire to help the reader along by abridging or sacrificing the language of the text. However, since it is clear what Barash's views were regarding literature and religion, I must be cautious about being too faithful to the Hebrew. The religious overtones are mainly the byproduct of the time and place the stories were written, not due to the content itself. In order to avoid a trap which Clifford Landers deems "A slavish fealty to literal meaning that distorts the author's intent" (67), where the translator is too exacting in the literal translation of each word in the original text, I must make constant decisions, in nearly every paragraph, whether a biblical quote is there for a religious reason or for its proverbial value; and then translate in a relevant manner. Missteps here are nearly inevitable, yet may throw off an entire interpretation of an episode. For instance, are the words "Jewish maidservant" meant to echo the biblical and *halachic* (Jewish law) perspective? Or is the term there simply to indicate a certain kind of employment on part of Yaakov's father? I believe it is the latter.

Moreover, there are historic, literary and political references which give cause for much research. These stories take place at a time when empires were crumbling apart while others were being rebuilt. Nations are referenced throughout the stories yet no longer exist, linguistic subtleties connote much, but are now considered obsolete, and literary references, with the Hebrew spelling making no allowances for localized spellings have proven difficult to track down, such as סיפורי צ'וקה (transliterated as Choka) which seem to be the works of Heinrich Zschokke, a

German author who was well-known at the time, yet is virtually unknown in the English-speaking world today.

These examples appear in the opening pages of the short story "Embroidery," but many more abound throughout Barash's works, forcing me as translator to parse my way through every line, hoping I will not miss any critical theme. This of course poses the distinctive challenge yet uncanny satisfaction of this genre of translation.

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