

THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH

TS ELIOT'S KOSHER BEDBUGS

This October marks the centenary of the publication of TS Eliot's groundbreaking modernist poem *The Waste Land*. But it was Eliot's other masterpiece, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, that was the inspiration for a Yiddish parody by writers Saul Bellow and Isaac Rosenfeld

On 12 February 1926, the American Yiddish poet Mikhl Likht sent TS Eliot a letter asking for permission to translate several of his works into Yiddish, including his seminal essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', for the Yiddish magazine *Unzer bukh*. Likht implored him to forgo payment in order to "afford us the aesthetic pleasure... of bringing into our literature those foreign yet not alien spirits whom we find either to be supplementary to our own or, realising their richer experiences and more varied expressions, we so justly aspire to welcome into our midst."

Born in Plisk, Ukraine in 1893, Likht emigrated to America in 1913, attended the City College of New York and the New School for Social Research, and began

writing English-language poetry for avant-garde magazines. He also contributed to many Yiddish literary journals in the 1920s, and his poems demonstrate the desire to infuse Yiddish writing with elements of modern American poetry.

However, his work, which was more experimental than that of his contemporaries, never commanded the acclaim other Yiddish poets received. Likht understood that he was an outsider in two worlds, equally incomprehensible to Yiddish and English poets and readers alike. When Eliot responded to Likht's letter, giving permission to publish the translations for free, he offered this caveat: "I shall be very glad to see a copy of the magazine in which the essays appear, although I regret that I shall be unable to read it."

In addition to Eliot, Likht translated around 30 other writers into Yiddish, including Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy. But he was not the only American Jewish writer attempting to bring Eliot to a Yiddish audience. In the mid-1930s, Saul Bellow and Isaac Rosenfeld created a Yiddish parody of Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. It was titled, *Der shir hashirim fun Mendl Pumshtok* and is a parody of Eliot's parody of love poetry. The title of the piece comes from the Bible's ultimate love song, *Shir Hashirim* (the *Song of Songs*).

The poem was

never published – in fact, it was never written down – and was only transmitted orally. Moreover, there has been debate ever since about which writer took the lead in producing it.

The version quoted below was published in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry: Volume XII* by literary scholar Ruth Wisse. She had received it from historian Lucy Dawidowicz, who was given the poem by British writer Chaim Raphael, who had heard it recited by sociologist Daniel Bell.

The poem begins, "Nu-zhe, kum-zhe, ikh un du, / Ven der ovnt shteyt uf kegn dem himl / Vi a leymener goylm af Tisha b'Av" (Nu, let's go, you and I / When the evening stands under the sky / Like a clay golem on Tisha b'Av). Eliot's half-deserted streets become the twisted strands of a rabbi's beard: "Lomir geyn zikh / Durkh geselakh vos dreynen zikh / Vi di bord fun dem rov" (Let's go / Through the winding alleys that twist and turn / Like the rabbi's beard).

Later, the sawdust restaurants of London become grimy kosher establishments where even the bedbugs are Jewish: "Oyf der vant fun dem koshern restorant / Hengt a shmutsiker betgevant / Un vantsn tantsn karahod" (On the wall of the kosher restaurant / Hangs a filthy bedsheet / And the bedbugs dance in a circle). The cultured women who speak of Michelangelo become socialists discussing Marx and Lenin: "In tsimer vu di vayber zenen / Ret men fun Marx un Lenin" (In the room where the women / Speak together of Marx and Lenin).

Prufrock's final sigh – "I grow old, I grow old / I shall wear the bottom of my trousers rolled," as he contemplates his death – becomes Pumshtok's complaint about his cold belly button: "Ikh ver alt, ikh ver alt / Es vert mir in pupik kalt" (I grow old, I grow old / My belly button's getting cold). With this, Bellow and Rosenfeld succeed in inserting Eliot, his polished language and his English gentleman into the Yiddish speaking world with all its quotidian grotesqueries. ■

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Modern American Poetry, translated into Yiddish by Mikhl Likht, 1953

