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 pleasures... of bringing into our literature those foreign yet not alien spirits whom we find either to be supplementary to our own or, realizing 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 Munia Loy. But he was not the only American Jewish writer attempting to bring Eliot to a Yiddish audience. In the mid-1950s, Saul Bellow and Isaac Rosenfeld created a Yiddish parody of Eliot’s The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. It was titled, Der shir bashirin fun Mendel Pumpshtok 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, "Na-ze, kum-zhe, ikh un du..." (You and I...)

Let’s go / Through the winding alleys that twist and turn / Like the rabbi’s beard.

Later, the sawdust restaurants of London become grindy kosher establishments where even the bedbugs are Jewish: "Oy der vant fun dem kosher restaurant / Heng a shmutziker betevnik / Un vantent tanzen karahot.” (On the wall of the kosher restaurant / Hang a filthy bedsheet / And the bedbugs dance in a circle.) The cultured women who speak of Michelangelo become socialists discussing Marx and Lenin: "In tovimer va di vayber zeren / 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 Pumpshtok’s complaint about his cold belly button: "Tkh ver alik, tkh ver at / Es vert mir in pupik kats.” (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.

See: www.ymj.org. Stefania Halpern is the director of the YIVO Archives.