

“Translating Yenta Mash”

By Ellen Cassedy

Ellen Cassedy received a 2016 PEN/Heim translation grant for her work on the Yiddish writer Yenta Mash, the first time the prize was awarded for a Yiddish book. She is the co-translator, with Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, of *Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories* by Blume Lempel. She and Taub received the 2012 translation prize from the Yiddish Book Center for their translation of Lempel’s fiction. Ellen was a 2015-16 translation fellow at the Yiddish Book Center. She is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust*, which received several national prizes and was shortlisted for the William Saroyan International Prize for Literature. Visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.

I’ll talk this afternoon about who Yenta Mash was, why I was drawn to translate her work, and how I went about it with support from the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, and the challenges I encountered. Finally, I’ll give you a taste of Yenta Mash’s work by reading an excerpt from one of her most powerful stories, called “Broyt,” or “Bread.”

There’s an expression in Yiddish called “the golden chain,” “di goldene keyt,” which refers to the chain of Yiddish literature through the ages, with one writer after another adding links to the chain as the years pass. Part of what keeps that golden chain strong is, and has always been, translation, and I consider it a privilege to add my link to the chain as a translator of this very fine literature.

Yenta Mash was born in 1922 in a small town, or shtetl, called Zguritse, located in the southeastern region of Europe then known as Bessarabia. Today it lies within the nation of Moldova, just east of Romania.

In 1941, this world of the shtetl was violently shattered. As Soviet and German Nazi forces vied for control of the region, the Germans deported Jews to death camps, and the Soviets deported them to the gulag. When Mash was 19, she and her parents were condemned as “bourgeois elements” and exiled to Siberia. There she endured seven years of hard labor under extreme conditions of privation and hunger. Both of her parents died.

In 1948, Mash escaped from the gulag. She married and made her way to the city of Kishinev (now Chişinău), not far from her girlhood home. At the turn of the 20th century, the city of Kishinev had become world-famous as the site of the anti-Semitic pogrom of 1903. After World War II, it became the capital of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, and also, it so happened, a lively center of Jewish cultural life. In these postwar years, Yenta Mash became friendly with Jewish writers and participated in the literary doings in the city. She dreamed of being a writer and had a great deal to communicate about her destroyed childhood world and her experiences in the gulag.

But she was afraid to write. Why? Because she was what we would now call undocumented. She didn't have papers. And her story – deported as a bourgeois element, escaped from exile – gave her a very dangerous resume. So for three decades, Mash worked as a bookkeeper, stayed out of the limelight, and did not write.

In the 1970's, emigration opened up for Jews in Soviet Moldavia. Mash made aliyah and settled in Haifa. And there, finally, in her 50's, she began to write. The words poured out, in the form of four volumes of short stories. She was published in Yiddish journals throughout the world and received several literary prizes. She died in 2013.

To date, Yenta Mash's work has not been available to English-language readers. I've just completed a book-length translation of her stories, selected from all four volumes, for which I'm seeking a publisher. Here's how I came to translate this writer.

A number of years ago, when my mother died, I decided to study Yiddish as a memorial to her. My mother (who was Jewish, unlike my father) didn't actually speak Yiddish, but she peppered her speech with a Yiddish word here and a word there. After my mother died I went looking for a way to stay connected to Yiddish and to my Jewish heritage. I was fortunate to be able to collaborate with Aaron Taub on translating fiction by the extraordinary writer Blume Lempel, and when we finished that manuscript, which you'll hear about in a few minutes, I heard about the program for Yiddish translators that was starting up under the auspices of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA, and I applied to be part of it.

The translation program at the Yiddish Book Center is the brainchild of Sebastian Schulman, who translates not only from Yiddish but also from Esperanto. The program trains ten Yiddish translators per year. You go to Amherst for three weekends over the course of the year. You pair off for what is known as *khevruse*, working as partners.

You also attend intensive workshops in groups of five, under the guidance of distinguished translators from a variety of languages. Interestingly, for the most part, these workshop leaders, and the mentors who you work with online over the course of the year, generally don't know Yiddish. It's actually considered kind of a plus for your mentor not to know Yiddish, because they don't know all the tropes of Yiddish diction. So when you find yourself using the word "already," "shoyn," in every other sentence, as it appears in the original, instead of thinking, "oh, right, that's how it is in Yiddish," your mentor is likely to say, "Hold on a minute, that sounds weird." Which is just what you need them to say.

As a translator in the program, your knowledge of Yiddish is assumed, it's a given, and it's just the starting point. Your real loyalty has to be to your target language, to your readers in English.

Through this program, a new generation of Yiddish translators is being nurtured, to take the place of older translators whose careers are reaching an end. Even the familiar Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz have work that has not yet made it into English. And there are now translators working on writers you've never heard of – yet – the authors of undiscovered treasures written on both sides of the Atlantic -- especially previously unknown work by women.

From this work, we're learning new things about Jewish life in the second half of the 19th century and the 20th century, especially women's lives, and also new things about the human condition in general.

So how did I connect to Yenta Mash? One or two pieces by Mash had been published in Yiddish in the Jewish Forward, and because of that, I learned about her from the librarian and Yiddishist Faith Jones. What especially drew me to the work of Yenta Mash is that although it is fiction, and very good fiction, it draws heavily from her own life experience. Mash offers a close-up, closely observed view of little-known corners of nearly a century of history. She traces an arc across continents, across multiple upheavals and regime changes, and across the phases of a woman's life from girlhood to old age.

Reading Mash, we learn about the vibrant days of small Jewish communities before the war – a lost world – and about the destruction of those communities. We learn about the experiences of Jewish women in Siberia – something nearly undocumented elsewhere in literature. Mash brings to life the deep connections that women forged in this fearsome environment of frozen steppes, snowy forests and surging rivers. She tells about the coping strategies the women devised, and the new roles they took on. She portrays their harrowing circumstances in meticulous detail, but at the same time, she makes clear, as one critic wrote, that “in such a macabre environment, under hellish conditions, goodness and beauty can exist under the same roof. Often a kind of special illumination seems to shine forth out of that pitiless darkness.”

Taking up the not-always-happy experience of immigration to Israel, Mash brings to life the challenges of assimilation, and the awkwardness of a land where young people instruct their elders, instead of the other way around. She shows us an old age that is by turns difficult and full of opportunities, including the joys and uncertainties of a late-life romance. And she makes clear that although Yiddish was not particularly wanted in the land of Israel, for her it was an essential part of her being and her self as a writer. Writing in Yiddish was a way to hold on to where she came from, to honor her origins and her lost people, to create continuity in a life full of dislocations.

Mash's literary strategies are usually quite straightforward. Her narratives take you from point A to point B in a standard literary fashion. But her sentences can be dense and complex, and they're studded with Bessarabian regionalisms -- earthy expressions and metaphors that can be quite challenging for the translator. Fortunately, I had on my side a distinguished linguist at Indiana University who was able to track down the most obscure words and phrases within minutes, and send me the answers on Facebook messenger.

Besides the density and the regionalisms, another challenge is that Mash writes about times of wrenching change, where her characters are struggling, as she herself did, to adjust to new times that spawn new words, new vocabularies. Different cultures with different languages are constantly thrown together. This is true in the gulag with its mix of Soviet administrators, Siberian peasants, and deportees from Eastern Europe. And it's true in Israel in the second half of the 20th century, with its mix of natives and immigrants from all over, many of them

struggling to master a new language, modern Hebrew. Soviet vocabulary and Israeli vocabulary are colorfully stirred into the pot, and one of the challenges I had as a translator was to make these elements stand out for the English-language reader in a similar way to how they stand out for the characters and the Yiddish-language reader, so that these different elements strike the reader as different, but not too much and not too little.

The final translation challenge I want to mention has to do with the nature of Yiddish as a language. As you know, Yiddish is a solidly European language – a Germanic language with a big helping of Slavic mixed in. Yet, as you also know, it's written in the Hebrew alphabet, and embedded within the Germanic foundation are words of ancient origin – Hebrew and Aramaic words, which are known as *loshn koydesh*, which means “holy tongue.” *Loshn koydesh* words look different – they're written with a shortage of vowels, like Hebrew – and they sound different.

The juxtaposition of *loshn koydesh* and “regular” words gives Yiddish literature a special flavor, a richness, a capacity for wit, irony, and lightning-fast changes of register. This is something also familiar to us as English speakers. So translators into English have the good fortune that English, like Yiddish, has an enormous capacity for different registers, with many choices available to us, from the more earthy Anglo-Saxon words to the more elevated words of Latin and Romance origin.

To a greater or lesser extent, Yiddish writers strategically employ *loshn koydesh* words to achieve specific aims. I found Yenta Mash to be notable in how she strategically freights her sentences with *loshn koydesh* words conveying religious reverence and awe, within the base of everyday Germanic words. The reader must feel both elements, and feel the irony and significance created by rubbing them together.

My job as the translator was to give each element its proper place – to allow the Biblical language to sound its note of reverence when that's what the author intends, and to convey the comfortable naturalness of “regular” Yiddish words when that's what is intended. That meant strategically choosing my English words from both the Latinate and the Anglo-Saxon vocabularies.

I want to close my presentation by reading to you from the story called “Broyt,” or “Bread,” which I consider one of Mash's best works. This story, like many of Mash's stories, is quite short – only four pages – but it encompasses two very different places and two very different eras. As in many of Mash's stories, what makes this piece especially rich is that we have a mature woman's viewpoint rubbing up against her youthful experience. I believe this is probably a true story.

The story opens at dawn on a street in a city in Israel, as the narrator watches a man and his horse making their way down the street, collecting day-old bread that has been put out on the curb to be recycled.

As she watches, the narrator recalls her exile in Siberia in the 1940's, under conditions of near starvation, when every crust of bread was beyond precious. Mash vividly evokes what it is

to be very, very hungry. And the story becomes even more horrific as she describes the terrible loss of her mother, which is bound up with the story of hunger.

The story puts two eras – modern-day, prosperous Israel and extreme, starvation-era Siberia – side by side, and rubs them together in a powerful way. In Israel, you have people casually taking their bread for granted, throwing it out after a day or two, and up against that, you see the world of terror and hunger that the narrator (and the author) carry with them.

I'll read the opening sentences in Yiddish so you can hear what that sounds like, and then the English.

Broyt

Vi nor s'heybt on sharien af tog,
kumen zey glaykh on.
Zey – dos meyn ikh dem yidn mit zayn ferd,
oder, beser gezogt, dos ferd mitn yidn,
makhmes mit zayn greys un mit zayne gezunte hiftn,
vos shpiln mamesh
unter der geler glantsndiker fel,
farshtelt dos ferd shoyn in gantsn
zayn balebos, dem kleynvuksikn teymener yid,
mitn tsigenem berdl
un mit di lange gekreyzlte peyes.

And now here's my translation of the story. I've abridged the story slightly so you can hear it all the way to the end.

“Every day at the break of dawn they arrive, the man and his horse – or should I say the horse and his man? The horse is so big, with sturdy hips rippling under a shining chestnut hide, that it could well be the boss of the little Yemeni man with wispy beard and long side curls.

“As I watch them from my window, pictures appear before me, pictures engraved in my memory, pictures that will accompany me to the end of my days....”

[Note: For copyright reasons, I haven't included all of what I read at the session. My reading ended like this:]

“Now I look out into the early morning and I wonder: my God, how many lives could be saved with the bread we throw away every day? I think of the moist white loaves of braided challah we have on shabbos. We put them on the table in a place of honor. We cover them with a white embroidered cloth. We light the candles and we say a blessing over them...and the next day we toss those very challahs in the garbage. Why, I ask, why do we even bother to bless them?”