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**Polyglotism of Jewish Latvian Literati and Linguistic
Politics of the Periphery: Observation through M.
Razumnyi and A. Imermanis**

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Latvia is one of the most conspicuously multilingual societies in the world today. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russians constitute half the population of the capital city, Riga. According to *The Baltic States after Independence*, “As early as the interwar period, Riga was dominated by non-Latvians, especially Germans, Jews and Russians. Today almost half of Riga’s inhabitants are of Eastern Slav descent, while Latvians make up well over one-third. . . . In none of the seven largest towns of Latvia [today] do Latvians comprise more than half the residents” (Nørgaard et al. 174).

Because of the former obligatory Russian language education in the Soviet period and on account of the daily contact with Russian inhabitants, the majority of Latvians in Riga speak Russian as a near-native language, whereas very few Russians speak Latvian, a post-colonial condition that vexes present-day Latvians. To cite Nørgaard again, “Under the Soviet nationality policy, the massive immigration of Russophones was followed by an ever increasing cultural and especially linguistic dominance, so that the local languages were subordinated to Russian. Teaching of Russian was obligatory in all schools. . . . The result of Russian nationality policy [under the Soviet regime] was the superior position of the Russian language and considerable privileges for the Russophone inhabitants in the Baltic States. Good knowledge of Russian became prerequisite for an individual’s career and social mobility. The Russian-speaking immigrants had neither the incentive nor very good chances of learning the local language. For this reason, only about one-third of immigrants can adequately speak the local

languages today” (178).

Latvia has had a complicated history of political regimes: when it emerged in history during the late Middle Ages, it was part of a German colony. Since then, it has had a number of alternating masters: Poland, Sweden, Germany, and Russia. Such a history, marked with constant colonization, contributed to Latvia’s multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual makeup near the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. For instance, the founder of Russian Japanology, Evgenii Spalvin (1872–1933), was a native of Riga who grew up speaking Latvian, while studying at a gymnasium where lessons were taught in German. Thus, Spalvin became a native or near-native speaker of Latvian, Russian, German, and, later, of Japanese.¹

Jewry constituted yet another layer of this multi-lingual/multi-cultural society. Before the Holocaust, Riga was one of the centers of Jewish population in Europe, and it had its own Jewish section. Yiddish was, naturally, the basic tool of communication there. Some Jewish intellectuals had difficulty coming to terms with that on ideological grounds. In a letter to Sholem Aleichem, protesting his support of Yiddish, writer Lev Gordon, wrote: “[Идиш —] клеймо скитальца-изгнанника... Его можно терпеть как необходимое зло, им можно пользоваться как орудием для проведения лучших идей в нашу темную массу” (Val’dman 143). To this a journalist, Sergei Tsinberg, retorted: “[Е]врейская интеллигенция с непостижимым эгоизмом наложила *veto* на жаргон, которого она стыдилась и в котором она лично больше не нуждалась. Она, интеллигенция, никак не хотела понять, что... четыре миллиона евреев говорят только на этом языке” (144).

This statement, conversely, attests to the fact that, if lay Jews were monolingual, speaking only Yiddish, members of the Jewish intelligentsia were, as a rule, bilingual (or trilingual or more). The Jews in Riga who attended school spoke at least three languages: Yiddish, German, and Russian: “В 90-х годах [девятнадцатого века] началась руссификация региона [т.е. в Риге], и обязательным языком в школах стал русский. Расцвет русской литературы, влияние революционного движения наряду с участием евреев в экономической жизни города привели к тому, что рижское еврейское население говорило на двух [иностраннх]

языках—немецком и русском” (Bobe 102).

Bilingualism or multilingualism of Jewish intellectuals is a universal phenomenon; however, in Riga it has been quite extreme. Many literati wrote in two or more languages. Nineteenth-century writer Aaron Pumpianskii (1835–1893) published in German, Russian, and Yiddish (Smirin 11). The prominent Soviet author from Latvia, Anatol Imermanis (1914–1998), published in Latvian and Russian (Smirin 59). The playwright and novelist from Riga, Mark Razumnyi (1896–1988), wrote in Yiddish, German, Russian, and Latvian and translated from English (Rennert “Afterword” to *Auch im Herbst Blühen die Bäume* 197).

Yiddish in Latvia (as in many other parts of Eastern Europe in the former Russian imperial regime) lost its prominence as a literary and communicative language after the liquidation of the Jewish population through pogroms, the Holocaust, and the anti-cosmopolitan movement²; before that, however, Yiddish literature flourished, and Yiddish theater was also very productive.

Mark Razumnyi, who was actively involved in Riga’s Yiddish theater during the 1930s, was prominently multilingual, even among Latvian Jewish literati polyglots. He was born in 1896 in the *shtetl* of Zhager, Lithuania, and grew up in Riga. After serving briefly in the Red Army in 1919, he emigrated to Germany. He lived in Hamburg, where he studied at the university. His first publication was a story written in German, which appeared in Hamburg’s *Israelitisches Familienblatt*.³ In 1921, he returned to Riga, where he worked for various Yiddish periodicals. At that time, he was also a correspondent for New York-based Yiddish journals and had a chance to travel to the United States, which would lead to calamity later in his life (Smirin 40).

As is well known, Soviet leaders were, at first, very supportive of Jewish culture. Publication in Yiddish and the Yiddish press was encouraged and supported.⁴ Stalin drastically changed this trend. First, he (admittedly, developing Lenin’s notion) deprived the Jews of status as a nation. Stalin famously defined *nation* as “a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture” (8), thus outlawing the Jewish nation, as it did not possess a common territory. Completely redirecting the Soviet policy concerning Jewry, Stalin’s politics

were largely anti-Semitic. In 1937, during the Great Terror, Mikhail Mikhoels, the Latvian-Jewish stage director who led GOSET (Moscow National Jewish Theater), was assassinated.⁵ The anti-cosmopolitan campaign was then launched, which started in 1949 with the revelation of some literary critics' Jewish ancestry and their castigation as "rootless cosmopolitans." The campaign soon led to the purge of many Jewish intellectuals, including Razumnyi. In April of 1950, he was arrested and charged with being involved in the Jewish Anti-Fascist committee, once led by Mikhoels and now associated with Zionism and American geopolitics, and with meeting with an American journalist during his stay in New York. He was tried for allegedly working for the American intelligence service and was sentenced to 10 years of labor in a correction camp. In 1956, his case was reviewed, and he was released with his honor restored (Smirin 40).

After his release from the camp and his rehabilitation, Razumnyi resumed his literary activities in the 1960s. However, his line of work had apparently changed significantly. First, his early literary output consisted of plays for the Yiddish theater and novels.⁶ Now Razumnyi wrote exclusively very short, essay-like, personal narratives that he termed *novellas*. He wrote them in Yiddish, and two collections were published by the Moscow publisher, Sovetskii pisatel', although in rather small quantities. For instance, 2,200 copies were printed of his first collection, *Breiter di trit*. Of course, the number of copies demonstrates the decline of Yiddish in the Soviet Union. "Jewish culture fell into the trap laid by the authorities. Yiddish was not taught, and no Yiddish textbooks were published. There was hardly any demand for fiction in Yiddish. A few volumes were printed in small unprofitable editions by the Moscow-based publishing house Sovetskii pisatel'.⁷ Soviet Yiddish culture was becoming the exclusive fare of the older generation, which had been socialized under entirely different circumstances" (Chernin 231–232). The second collection, *A Velt mit vunder* (1986), was published only posthumously.

In contrast, Razumnyi published four volumes of novellas translated into Russian (cf. bibliography), though the number of copies was not large. Many of the novellas included in those collections were either translated or authorized by him.⁸ Thirty thousand copies of the Russian translation of *Breiter di trit*, *I Osen'iu tsvetut derev'ia*, were printed.⁹ Although this may

seem like a tremendous circulation (and it is more than ten times larger than the circulation of his collection in Yiddish), it is a modest number for literary publications by Soviet standards. Nonetheless, obviously, even this would have appealed to Razumnyi, whose venues in Yiddish were becoming increasingly scarce.

The decline of Yiddish publications was, actually, concomitant with the trajectory of Razumnyi's life: it is not difficult to imagine that Razumnyi must have been cautious about publishing in Yiddish, or about publicizing his Jewish connection in general after spending six years in a correction camp because of the anti-Semitic movement.

This may explain the very feebly ethnic/nationalistic—but notably cosmopolitan—style of his later literary production.

In fact, his novellas from the late 60s to the early 80s are marked by their somewhat sentimental, often pessimistic, but, in the last instance, humanistic touch; they are serene and detached but filled with a belief in universal humanity. For instance, in a novella written in memory of his Latvian poet friend, Eizēns Vēveris, titled: "*Skazhi vovremiia* (Say in time)," the author-narrator relates his frequent visits to his friend, which always ended with a frustrated impression that something had been left unsaid. The narrator keeps promising himself that he would tell his friend the next time. Then the poet dies and the narrator is in distress: "It was incredible to see his closed eyes that had always shone with love for man (*chelovek*), for his native language and its power. Unexpectedly these wonderful lips were shut, with which he had so joyfully and brilliantly expressed his heated 'partiality' for everything on earth. . . . Returning home, I suddenly understood with pain in my heart that now I should never be able to tell him what I left unsaid" (*I Osen'iu tsvetut derev'ia* 192). Razumnyi let the reader briefly touch on the profound, eternal truth of life: essential incommunicability among people and the hopelessness of its solution because we humans are temporal and finite, using a commonplace expression like "Say in Time." Here, Razumnyi's humanistic vocabulary is also evident: love for "humans," "love for everything on earth," etc.

However, it is to be suspected that, underneath such a humanistic, universalist gesture, Razumnyi was concealing a penchant for Yiddish and Judaism. For instance, in his novella, "*Tseihns afn lebntveg* (Signs on the

Road of Life),” in his late collection of short stories, *A Velt mit Vunder* (*A World with Wonder*), the author writes of his first encounter with punctuation marks (signs) in the course of learning orthography as a child. He relates: “A hipsh bisl ioren iz farlofn zint iener tsait, ven h’bin tsum ershtn mol araingedrungen in di soides fun ivre (A considerable amount of years have passed since I, for the first time, delved into the secrets of Hebrew)” (51). The German translation, “Zeichen auf dem Lebensweg,” is quite literal: “Eine stattliche Anzahl von Jahren ist verflossen, seit ich erstmals in die Geheimnisse des Hebräischen eindrang,” (*Eine Welt voller Wunder* 121), likewise referring to “the secret of Hebrew.”¹⁰ In contrast, the Russian translation omits the qualifier “Hebrew” and speaks only of “the secret of literacy” (*Razgovor s portretom* 150).¹¹

One is immediately struck by the omission of the word *Hebrew* in the Russian translation. Obviously, Razumnyi did not wish to draw the attention of Russian readers to the Jewishness of his text, instead, trying to make the translation sound as objective and descriptive as possible. This is in line with his detached, tranquil style.

This, naturally, is to be understood, considering the trouble being Jewish had caused him. It is also parallel with the fact that his German text is engaging and passionate, as opposed to the uninvolved, matter-of-fact narration of the Russian version. For example, the above-cited novella, “Signs on the Road of Life,” continues to discuss the moment when the author discovered the question mark. The German translation reads something like: “It remains for me unforgettable, how I once, in the middle of the great rapture, was astonished and, confused, as I came across an unknown, curiously distorted sign, which obstructed my way” (121). The Russian text reads: “I will not forget how I once, in the process of reading, suddenly came across a distorted sign unknown to me” (51). Obviously, the German text is quite a dramatic exposition of his experience in his youth, whereas the Russian version is a down-to-earth, restrained account of events in life.

It is difficult to hypothesize, merely out of this contrast, some meaningful linguistic difference in literary production on the part of Razumnyi. The fact still remains, however, that in the Russian texts, Razumnyi was cautious about Jewish connections and tended to opt for more neutral descriptions in

Russian, whereas in German, he was more involved and liberal with his references to Judaism.

Are we to conclude from this that, with Yiddish texts being more or less suppressed, Razumnyi was partial to German rather than Russian to more accurately present his concealed Yiddish original? Was he more attached to German than to Russian?

With a paucity of biographical information, it is difficult to judge; however, I am inclined to believe that Razumnyi's attitude toward the languages he used was, on the whole, impartial. One finds no hint in any of his writings that he felt deprived of his native Yiddish or forced to write in alien languages—Russian, Latvian, or German. After all, these languages were all native or almost native to him. He wrote freely in Russian, Latvian,¹² and German, and he had literary contacts in these languages, as shown in his novella dedicated to Eižens Vēveris.¹³ Vēveris, another Latvian bilingual, wrote poetry in Russian; in all likelihood, Razumnyi and Vēveris communicated alternately in Latvian and Russian. In the novella cited above, "Say in Time," featuring Vēveris, when Razumnyi writes of "Vēveris's love for *his* mother tongue," the original actually mentions "love for a (or the) mother tongue." Readers are left uncertain as to which language is implied. Rather, readers get the impression that Razumnyi was speaking of a general love for any native language. Exactly which language is native is completely contingent.

In this respect, Razumnyi stands in contrast to another Latvian-Jewish poet already mentioned—Anatol Imermanis—who wrote in Latvian and Russian. Imermanis was born in Moscow in 1914 and grew up in Liepāja, Latvia, graduating from the Institute of English in Riga. Latvian and Russian were his native languages, and he also spoke English fluently. When he started writing, he oscillated between writing literature in Latvian and Russian. For him, the choice was always conscious, value-laden, and often troublesome. In the preface to the symbolically titled collection of poems, *Riga—Moscow*, he explained: "I was born in Moscow. My second native language was Russian. It was in Russian that, at ten, I wrote my first poem. Until 1931, when I graduated from a Russian junior high school, I wrote only in Russian. Therefore, personally speaking, my return to Russian poetry in 1961, which astonished people who knew me as a Latvian poet, was not so unexpected"

(2). Then, referring to the year he spent in Moscow in 1961 and to his association there with Russian poets, he explained how Moscow had become his second motherland. He added that he was happy all the same that the collection was published in Riga.

Imermanis was, thus, torn between two languages; he felt apologetic about his choice of language because each represented a respective motherland.

Razumnyi was obviously free from such linguistic nationalism. For him, a native language was contingent and unmotivated, unassociated with a motherland, whatever that might have been for him. The reason for this must be sought in the fact that he could write in four languages as his “native” languages.

Obviously, this has much to do with the fact that Latvia was in the periphery of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Because of this peripheral (and, hence, colonial) situation, Latvians were (and are) forced into the bilingual (postcolonial) condition. Latvian Jewry, as a peripheral substratum of the Latvian society (thus being doubly peripheral, vis-à-vis the center), were forced further into multilingualism: trilingualism, quatrolingualism, and beyond. We observe that, in the case of Mark Razumnyi, such polyglotism as a result of the status of the diasporic, peripheral Jewry of Latvia, apparently led to the liquidation, or at least the devaluation, of the national consciousness. Apparently, the central power tends to strive for monolingualism, while the periphery strives for polyglotism. Here, probably, lies a chance (and a hope) for the subversion of the fixed power structure.

Notes

1. For details, see Yokota-Murakami, “Spalvin v Rige.”
2. Although the following information concerns the Soviet Union in general, “[a]ccording to the 1959 USSR population census, the number of Jews who claimed Yiddish as their native tongue was a little over 20 per cent of the number of people registered as Jews. This percentage fell consistently from census to census” (Chernin 228).
3. I have not been able to locate the text.
4. “By the late 1930s, the ‘era of building’ was over. Most of the state-engineered innovations introduced previously to Jewish social and cultural life, such as Yiddish schools, Yiddish-language courts, Jewish agricultural communes and local autonomous districts were gone or effectively destroyed. . . . Jews became a specific target for communist repression only in the

- late 1940s" (Krupnik 72).
5. For more on the liquidation of Mikhoels, see Etinger, "The Doctors' Plot."
 6. For instance, the two-hundred-page novel *Dos Land fun toiznt geshtaltn*, the novel *Mentshn in shtoib*, the play *Einer tsvishn milionen*, and so on.
 7. *Breiter di trit* was published by Sovetskii pisatel'.
 8. That is to say, what is called *avtorizovannyi perevod* in Russian.
 9. There is no mention in the translated volume, *I Osen'iu tsvetut derev'ia*, that it is a translation of *Breiter di trit*. The content of the two, although largely overlapping, does not completely coincide. The German translation, apparently from the Yiddish original rather than the Russian translation, carries a title common to the Russian edition: *Auch im Herbst Blühen die Bäume* (The Trees Blossom in Autumn Also). However, the German translation is not identical to *Breiter di trit* (it differs in content from the Russian translation as well). The reasons for such discrepancies and the relation among the original and the translations are quite enigmatic and require further research.
 10. The afterword to *Eine Welt voller Wunder* by the translator, J. Rennert, suggests that he was in contact with the author of the original. How much Razumnyi intervened in the translation process is unknown.
 11. «Много лет прошло с тех пор, как я впервые проник в тайны грамоты». This novella was translated into Russian by the author himself.
 12. His novelettes in Latvian were published in various newspapers and journals, such as *Zilīte*, *Literatūra un Māksla*, etc., in 1960s. They appeared without translators' names, which might suggest that they had been translated (or even composed) by Razumnyi himself.
 13. Eižens Vēveris is a poet/history teacher born in Riga (1899–1976) (<http://www.geni.com/people/Ei%C5%BEens-V%C4%93veris/6000000007466291271>).

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