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The Yiddish Sonnets by M. Freed: notes on the history of literary Yiddish in Bukovina

The history of the Yiddish language may well be described as polycentric, meaning that there continually existed, no matter how inconstant they might have been in terms of their precise geographical location, more than one vigorous cultural attractor at a time, each of them rendering the entropy of Jewish culture centripetal and in this way not only debunking the tempting if forbidden fruit of assimilation, but withstanding ideological challenges issued by its Jewish competitors. In the late XIX and early XX cent. an important Jewish centre of the sort was Bukovina with its chief town, Czernowitz, proudly bearing the title of "ירושלים בְּיַם פְּרוּט" ("the Jerusalem on the Prut"). And yet when discussing the corresponding literary and linguistic matters one may often come across a popular and not entirely unjustified view according to which this "Jew-friendly" location was almost inextricably linked to its inherent and pervading Germanizing aura, leaving any vernacular far behind. In particular, analyzing the German-language literature of Bukovina, Petro Rykhlo mentions numerous facts showing that it was created mostly by ethnic Jews who viewed German culture as native and inspiring, and believed themselves to be full members of the German nation. Other discordant data adduced in this connection urge one to arrive at the conclusion that, though Germanizing tendencies were present and, perhaps, quite widespread, the integral picture of local linguistic conditions can be dangerously distorted if painted in black and white.

The poetic collection entitled 'The Narcissi' ("נאַרציסן") was issued in Czernowitz in 1937 under the authorship of M. Freed (מ. פֿריד). One of the few still existing copies of the book is currently preserved at the Museum for the History and Culture of Bukovinian Jews. The other poetic collection, a less rare edition published in New York in 1942, is entitled "An evening by the Prut" ("אַװנט בײַם פֿרוט") with M. Freed-Winninger (sic!) (מ. פֿריד װײַנינגער) designated as the author. The first puzzle about the two books lies already in the genre which the author chooses to elaborate. Though not foreign to later Yiddish literature written mostly in the US, France, and Israel (J. L. Kalushiner, M. Leib, J. S. Taubes, Sh. Roitman), the sonnet enjoyed little popularity with East European Jewry and was rather looked upon as a suspiciously "gentile" genre, quite fit for languages such as English, or, in case with Bukovina, German, but hardly able to compete with the trademark Yiddish "לידער און באַלאַדעס" – "songs" and ballads. To be successfully executed in Yiddish, it needed the corresponding themes, imagery, stylistic tones, and linguistic means which could only have been borrowed from European literary tradition. And yet in terms of literary matters "borrowing" can either mean "copying deferentially," or "developing within,

having the foreign as an example”, the former case being usually doomed to deadlock, but the latter more often than not given a chance of survival. In case with Bukovina deference meant coming over to the German language and, largely, to the German nation. And yet there existed another option represented, among other things, by the works under consideration.

The paper highlights the linguistic means applied by M. Freed in order to transform the distinctly “vernacular” Yiddish language into a means of writing poetic works following the refined pattern of the Italian sonnet.