From translation to creation : the  *Seyfer minhogim* by Shimeon ben Yehuda Halevi Guenzburg (Venice, 1593)

In some studies of Old Yiddish literature we read that the *Seyfer Minhogim*, a book of customs by Shimon ben Yehuda Halevi Guenzburg (Venice 1589, 1593) is a simple translation of the *Sefer ha-minhagim* by Eyzik Tyrnau, the Austrian rabbi and compiler from the end of the 14th century. In fact, the *Seyfer minhogim* by Guenzburg is more than a simple adaptation of Tyrnau’s Hebrew source. The book of customs by Guenzburg reflects the complexity of the relation between the original source in Hebrew and the Yiddish version. It requires that we reconsider the issue of translation from *Loshn koydesh* to *loshn ashkenaz*. The adaptation of sacred texts into the vulgar language played a decisive role in the creation of the Old Yiddish literary language, and helps us analyze the techniques of translation used to communicate essential religious values and to disseminate religious practices among lay readers.

Before the widespread dissemination enabled by the rise of printing we find some opposition from rabbinical authorities to the translation of halakhic texts into the vernacular. The Maharil, for example, in a *responsum* opposes the translation of *Minhogim* into Yiddish. Particularly threatening was the danger that halakhic norms would be distorted and that because of the diffusion of halakhic texts, less educated Jews might begin to consider themselves experts on Jewish law. But the need to combat ignorance and to disseminate religious practices among simple Jews leads to the acceptance of the translation of limited parts of halakhic prescription into the vernacular language.

If we compare Tyrnau’s book of customs in Hebrew and Guenzburg’s adaptation into Yiddish, we find many similarities. Of course, Guenzburg reproduced the fixed order of the feasts following the Jewish calendar, the description of the customs and the sequence of the rituals. The purpose of the two compendiums of customs is also very similar. In the Hebrew introduction of his book, Tyrnau explains: « Among people of faith, of Torah and of good deeds *(anshei emunah, ve-torah ve-maasim tovim)* many have perished and are lacking in Austria, to the point that I have seen communities in which there are no more than two or three experts who know the ins and outs of local practice, let alone those of another town”. Eyzik Tyrnau mentions that his book is intended, not only for the literate, but also for all Jews, in order to « straighten out, correct and put well in order the practices of the entire year, so that they will be perfectly known by every person and more than that in a simple language (*lishana kalila*)… I have shortened the demonstration of the principles and of a small part of the explanations; on the contrary, I have sometimes drawn out the presentation of a law ». Furthermore he adds : « And here I am, Isaac Tyrnau *Ha-tsair*, I have grown among the sages and guardians of the tradition, especially my saintly master and rabbi, Abraham Klausner, may his memory be blessed and his name kept alive. Most of them were inhabitants of Austria, experts and knowledgeable on the foundation of the practices, and it is from their waters that we quenched our thirst. I have observed among them many ancient practices and differences in custom (*Hilukei minhagim*). The great guide, our master and rabbi, Abraham Klausner, of blessed memory, the brilliant expert, added notes or glosses (*haggahot*)…. But in one note, one could find an opinion laid out in a certain way, and in another note, in a contrary way, to the point where one no longer knows how to behave. This is why I have ordered and gathered (the customs) from ancient collections and I have only written the final decision concerning the practice (*maskanat ha-minhag*) ».

To better understand the similarities between the Hebrew and the Yiddish text, we must recall some details concerning the life of the author. Shimeon ben Yehuda Halevi Guenzburg was a descendant of German Jews who fled the persecutions in Guenzburg and Ulm in southern Germany to settle in Italy. Guenzburg lived around 1580 in Padua. From the *Pinkas ha-kehila*, we know that, in the year 1583, he was a *Shamash* and, in 1585, he was the *Sofer ha-Kahal*. His next attested appearance is in Tannhausen (Swabia, between Ulm and Augsburg) where, at the end of the 16th century, he worked with the halakhist Yitzhak Mazia, as a printer. We then find him in Venice working for the Christian printer Giovanni di Gara and Daniel Zanetti. Guenzburg is a good example of the second-tier Jewish intelligentsia, which understood the possibilities offered by the art of printing. He is conscious of the need to transmit halakhic laws and customs to the less-educated, in order to motivate the scrupulous observance of Jewish practices. Tyrnau and Guenzburg are motivated by the same desire to diffuse and to popularize Jewish customs in a clear language that could be understood by everyone. The vernacularization of parts of Jewish law and custom leads Guenzburg to define and apply the different principles which had become main features of the few halakhic treatises in Yiddish, such as the *Azhoras noshim* (Cracow, 1535) or *Mitsves ha-noshim* (Venice 1552).

At that time, translation into Yiddish generally meant a literal transfer from the Hebrew source into the vernacular. Because of the need to give an exact, clear and concise explanation of the practices, such translations are source-text oriented, based on word-to-word equivalence. Guenzburg’s main goal is to present, for each holiday, the proper order (*rekhte seyder)* of the prayers, in order to facilitate memorization. Sometimes, contrary to Tyrnau, and in order to help the lay reader, Guenzburg gives a more detailed linking or sequence of prayers and explains that the reading of the book could be supplemented by a *Mahzor*: *un fulent oys vi es geshribn iz in der makhzoyrim* (« and complete or fill in as it is written in the book of prayers »). As in the bilingual *Mahzorim*, since the arrangement and order of the prayers has to be indicated, the text gives the first words of every benediction in Hebrew in their order of recitation, sometimes accompanied by a translation in the vernacular. Here is an excerpt from the prayers for *Shabes* morning which follows the Hebrew source:

“ We say the benedictions of *Shabbes* and not the *Mizmer le-toyde* because on *shabbes* we do not offer a *Korbn minkhe (offering of thanks)*, even if it is a very precious *mizmer*. And we say *va-yosh’e (And the Lord delivered Israel*), *and Nishmes (The soul of every living being)*. And the *Khazn* starts *Shokhen ad (He who dwells for eternity)* and the *Kadesh*, *Barekhu (Bless the Lord)*, *Ha-kol yodukhe (All shall praise you)*, and *La-El asher shabes (To God who rested from all His work)*. We pray for ourselves as we do on weekdays until the *Shimenesre*. First, we pray *Ha-El ha-kodesh* *(God the saintly),* then we say *Ysmekh Moyshe* (*Moshe rejoiced),* then *Retse* (*Look with favor)*, *Modim (We thank you*), and *Sim sholem (Grant peace)*. The *Khazn* recites the *Shimenesre* aloud one more time, then the *kedushe*. Then *Mi-mekomekhe malkenu tofi’e (From thy above, our King, appear and reign over us)* and *Yimelokh Adonai* (*The Lord shall reign)* and we end with the *shimenesre*, all the *kadesh* and the congregation says *veyhye be-nesue’*. And we take the *Seyfer Toyre* from the Ark. The *Khazn* says *Gadlu (Declare the greatness of the Lord)* and the congregation answers *Romemu (Exalt the Lord our God)* and says *Al ha-kol* *(For everything may it be exalted)*”.

However, Guenzburg is not only a translator, but also a creator who adds many explanations for the simple reader. The translation involves commentaries which depended on a variety of textual and extratextual factors, especially the aims to be achieved and assumptions about the target-audience. We also find many didactic clarifications which serve to make Jewish practices known and easily accessible to less educated readers by giving the exact meaning of the custom in the clearest way and by avoiding complex halakhic discussion. His main goal is to encourage observance, explain the reasons for the precepts *(taamei ha-mitsvot)* and aid in the memorization of specific practices. Most of the time, Guenzburg does not mention the exact sources of the Law, nor the details of the discussions between the halakhists, preferring to focus, with regard to customs, on the final outcome of these discussions. The popularization of the law and the vernacularization of the customs entailed an overall condensation and a selection of the most useful rules and customs, in order to avoid unnecessary detail and to exclude overly sophisticated discussion.

Old Yiddish texts often refer to these commentaries and clarifications as *atores koydesh*. These vernacular *haggahot* *(yidishe hagoes),* whether glosses or commentaries, are intended to bring halakhic rules within everyone’s reach. Sometimes, they are integrated, merged into the discourse, as in the translation (*fartaytshung)* of some Hebrew designations for certain practices, for example on *eyrev khatseyres* : *dos vort fun eyrev is toytsh vor mishung dos zi zikh unter anander vor mishen* (“The word *eruv* means mixture so that they are mixed together”). This is followed by a literal explanation : *dos itlikher kheylek hot an der matse dos zelb makht dos men meg trogn am shabbes fun eyner hoyz tsu dem andren* (“Each part of the *matse* has the same value / power, so that on shabbes we can carry from one house to another”). The same explanation is given for the *ereyv tafshiln*: *dos vort fun eyrev tafshiln is toytsh es vert for mousht di esn speyz fun yontev un shabbes durkh anader* (« the word *ereyv tafshiln*means that the food for the feast and for shabbes are mixed »). The fact that his target audience consisted mainly of less educated Jews accounts for Guenzburg’s frequent exhortation that people use the vernacular. One short example concerns the benediction of the search for *Khomets*; after the prayer in Aramaic (*Loshn targem*) or in Hebrew *(Loshn koydesh)* Guenzburg adds : *ven eyner nit veys tsu zogn in loshn koydesh za zol ers zogen in toytsh* (“When somebody does not know how to recite in Hebrew, he should say it in Yiddish”). Or another example : *ven eyner shon nit lernen kan za zol er leyen in toytsh struf bikklen ale tog eyn venig* (“When somebody cannot study, he must read in the ethical books a little bit each day”).

Guenzburg sometimes adds commentaries at the end of a passage so that the reader can perform the religious practice without being obliged to ask a rabbi. His book, especially for Jews living in villages and small communities without rabbis, becomes a kind of substitute for halakhic authority. Most of the additions concern the origins and reasons for specific practices. They are generally preceded by the sentence : *eyn andern tam* *iz* (“another reason/ meaning / explanation is”). These clarifications concern either halakhic rules mostly taken from the *Shulhan arukh,* or explanations taken from the Talmud, Midrashim or medieval commentators. For example, since the book is intended for male and female readers, it contains many allusions to Jewish women. In the chapter on *Rosh hodesh* we read (Taken from TJ, Ta’anit 1 : 6, 64c; Tosefta to Rosh ha-shanah 23a; Pirkei de rabbi Eliezer, 45; Rashi on Megilah 22b; Arukh ha-shulhan 417,10; Rema, Orah hayyim 417; Simon ben Tsemah Duran, Tashbets, III, n° 244) : "*Rosh hodesh* was given to women, because they refused to give their gold earrings to their husbands for the golden calf. For the construction of the Temple they willingly gave their jewelry. And the temple was erected on *Rosh hodesh Nisan*. That is the reason *Rosh hodesh* has been given more to women than to men. And it is also the reason they work less than the men ".

We find also much practical advice to simple Jews regarding the main gestures, as well as other details of the rituals and practices. In the chapter on *bdikes khomets*, of the two versions, the Yiddish one gives the more detailed and precise information. The Hebrew text explains (p. 36 in the Spitzer’s Hebrew edition): “Each person inspects his space and does not speak from the beginning to the end”. In the Yiddish version Guenzburg adds that it is possible to ask questions related to the search for *Khomets*. The Hebrew version only mentions that the search must be performed with a “wax candle” (*be-ner sha’avah*, in Yiddish *waksn likht*). Whereas in the Yiddish text, Guenzburg says to avoid “tallow candles” (in Yiddish *kheylev likht*) which could be *treyf* and he adds many practical details : “ If there is a hole in a wall which goes into the house of a non-Jew, we don’t search in this hole because the neighbour could suspect we want to set fire to his house or to practice witchcraft (*Kishef ton*)”.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Yiddish text, which is less notable in the Hebrew version, concerns the material culture, the daily life in Ashkenazic society and Jewish popular culture. A good example is found in the chapter on *Hoshana rabba*. In the Hebrew text, we find only the order of prayers and the *mishmerot*. In the Yiddish text Guenzburg adds a long digression on Sciomancy (From the Greek, *Skiomancia* or *Sciamancia*), the folk belief that he who, during the night of *Hoshana rabba*, does not see the shadow of each limb of his body will have troubles, for example he who does not to see the shadow of his head will die during the year. *Hoshanah rabba* was the day of the “seal”, wherein the verdict of man is “sealed” (Zohar, Exode, 142a-b). Another example, only found in the Yiddish version, concerns demonology, taken from the chapter on the first night of *Pesah* and the *Shabbat hol ha-moed Pesah*: “ We do not recite *mayrev* at *shabbes*…. But in Worms, we say *mayrev* even on *shabbes*. We recite *Mogn oves* (“Shield of our fathers”). But in some communities, we do not recite. The reason is *(Der tam iz)*: *Mogn oves* was prescribed because of (the danger) of demons (*mazikin*). In ancient times, the synagogues were located far in the countryside. People arrived (very) late in the synagogue and they could stay alone in the house of prayers. We made sure the *Khazn* recited *Mogn oves* so that the latecomers could recite the prayers to the end. During the night of *Peysekh*, there are no evil spirits (which come to torment the faithful)”. Another example deals with folk beliefs around *Tishebov*: “On the night of *Tishebov*, we eat lentils which are a symbol of mourning. Because a lentil is round to show that death is like a rolling thing. Today, somebody died, tomorrow, another one. We can eat seeds such as peas. Peas have a black line like a mouth. But lentils have no mouth, like a bereaved person who does not speak”.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Yiddish *Seyfer ha-minhogim* concerns the description of local customs (*Minhagei ha-makom*) which allows us to reconstruct many elements of the *minhag Ashkenaz*. In the introduction to his *Sefer minhagim* in Hebrew, from the first decade of the fifteenth century, Eizik Tyrnau explains that he collects customs of communities in Austria, Hungary -- designated by the term Hagar (*Eretz Hagar, Beny Hagar*) because of the euphony between the people of Hagrim or Hagriim (Ps. 83, 7; I Chron. 5, 10, 19-20) and Hungarim (in Hebrew, "Hungarians") -- Steuermark (Styria, south of Austria) and Mehren (Moravia), quite a large area centered around Vienna, and his place of origin. In the first edition printed in Hebrew (Venice, 1566), the title page reads " A book of Customs of Poland, Bohemia and Germany”. In the bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish edition (Venice 1589, 1593), the title page retains these three divisions. In later editions, including those published in Amsterdam, the printers added the customs of Belarus (*Reisen*) and Lithuania (*Lite*). In the editions of the late Eighteenth Century, the printers spoke of: "The customs of all provinces *(k-minheg kol ha-medines)*.

Guenzburg takes, as did his model Tyrnau, the customs of the *bney estraykh* as the basis of his compendium, especially since most of Italy’s Ashkenazic Jews came,from the communities of South Germany, in the wake of the expulsion. However, to reach the widest possible Ashkenazic audience, the printers and Guenzburg mention the customs of other provinces, mostly Poland (*Polin*) and Western European communities, especially in the Rhineland valley, Spier, Worms and Mainz (*Shum*). Here are two relevant examples. One concerns the *Eyrev khatseyres* “Rabbi Yaakov Weil *za’l* writes that one should not put (the *matse*) in the synagogue, because nobody lives in it. At Worms, it is placed in the *shul*…The gaon Rabbi Meir ben Ephraim learned that in Padua we drew a white line with lime from one side and also on the wall of the synagogue instead of the *leh’i* (a stake fastened in the ground by the side of a wall, which serves as a marker to enable the residents of an alley to move objects on Shabbat and other holy days). But like a thread has no fixed form and in reference to the sages of Padua, I set two wires (in MHA *draht*, Yiddish *drot*) from the wall of the synagogue to the wall of the house of the *Shamesh*…”. The second example concerns the blessing on the lighting of the candles *Erev Shabbes* and other holidays. Eyzik Tyrnau says to light two candles on the eve of Yom Kippur with a special blessing, no matter the day of the week(*Shulhan arukh* 610, 2). Polish communities also follow this custom from Austria, as opposed to that of other Ashkenazic communities, like Frankfurt, where no candles are lit (See Hahn, *Yosef omets*, n° 944). Guenzburg makes the same distinction : *di vayber ontsundn un makht eyn brokhe druber ven es shon in der vokhn is un halt di hend oyz geshpreyt uber dos likht vi am shabbes. Eyn teyl veln keyn brokhe makhn* (“The women light (the candle) and make a benediction, even if it is during the week and spread their hands over the candle, as (they do) on Shabbes. Some don’t make a benediction”). The study of the differences in the prayers, liturgical practices, folk beliefs and legal rules mentioned in Guenzburg’s book can help us characterize the main religious and cultural regions of the Ashkenazic world.

The translations from Hebrew into Old Yiddish were often considered simple transpositions without much innovation. Close study of Guenzburg’s *Sefer minhogim* , like many other adaptations from the Holy tongue into the vernacular, shows, on the contrary, the creativity that characterizes the transfer from one language to another. This type of translation promoted the wider circulation of canonical texts, the dissemination of knowledge, previously limited to the rabbinical elite, an increase in literacy and a constant process of commentary and interpretation. It also fostered the standardization and the enrichment of the vernacular language, especially the vocabulary, and thereby played a decisive role in the creation of an Old Yiddish literary *koine* parallel to the colloquial language.