LANGUAGE AS HOPE

The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography; detailed data is available on the internet at https://portal.dnb.de/.

Inh. Dr. Nora Pester
Capa-Haus
Jahnallee 61
04177 Leipzig
info@hentrichhentrich.de
http://www.hentrichhentrich.de

Graphic Design: Michaela Weber
Cover: Gudrun Hommers
Printing: Winterwork, Borsdorf

1st edition 2023

Printed in the EU
ISBN 978-3-95565-352-1

Viola Beckmann, Liliana Ruth Feierstein (eds.)

LANGUAGE AS HOPE

L. L. Zamenhof and the Dream of a Cosmopolitan Wor(l)d

HENTRICH & HENTRICH

Content

We are grateful to the Polin Museum in Warsaw for its generous invitation to hold this workshop in December 2017. The museum authorities made this impressive experience possible—and the warmth and professionalism of Joanna Wojcicka-Warda made our days there unforgettable. At the spot where Mordechaja Anielewicz and Ludwika Zamenhofa, two streets that border the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto, cross one another, memories of struggles and resistance also intersect. The debates that took place at the conference held there gave rise to this book, which is dedicated to the memory of Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof and to all the fighters of the ghetto.

This publication has been made possible by the "Kosmos" funding program of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. We are also grateful for the constant support of colleagues at the Selma Stern Zentrum für jüdische Studien in Berlin-Brandenburg.

Introduction

The Heritage and Legacy of Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof between Judaism and Esperanto

Language is the most sacred possession of man;
It is with language that he thinks, rejoices and feels sad,
It is to language that his self-awareness is connected
And thus also his individual existence [...]
L. L. Zamenhof, Hilelismo (1901)[1]

In 2017, on the occasion of the centenary of L. L. Zamenhof's death, the Polin Museum published a call for proposals addressing his life and work. We were delighted, as some years ago we had begun to investigate the project conceived by Zamenhof – a "member of the tribe" who, although almost all Jewish encyclopedias make mention of him and a central street in Tel Aviv bears his name – is remembered as a *meshigene*, a naive dreamer. Jewish history did not take his project seriously, nor did many Esperantists seem to have interest in the Jewish roots of Esperanto and its creator.

Unexpectedly, a Jewish museum wondered about those roots – both his biographical details and the marks they had left on his works. The call for proposals brought only two responses: ours, and one from Federico Gobbo (Amsterdam), whose study of linguistics and language had led him to Zamenhof. Specialists at the Polin Museum suggested combining the two proposals, and the result was a small and innovative workshop at the museum in December 2017.

We would like to thank all the participants for their original contributions – and for the inspiring discussions during those days. Much later, despite the pandemic, the economic crisis, and the paper shortage, we were finally able to bring together some of the contributions, which we are happy to publish today.

In the meantime, not far from the places where Zamenhof grew up and worked, another war is under way. Zamenhof died in 1917, unable to see the end of what was then called the "Great War." His *Appeal to the diplomats*, pub-

1 L. L. Zamenhof: "Hilelismo. Projekto de solvo de la hebrea demando," in: Mi estas homo. Originalaj verkoj de d-ro L.-L. Zamenhof, ed. Korĵenkov, Aleksander, Kaliningrado 2006, 39–96, here 45.

lished in London in 1915 in Esperanto and English, was an appeal for the use of words to stop the violence, and to build a new Europe.[2]

The collected papers illuminate different aspects of Zamenhof's work and projects. The Talmud says that a man dies only when his name is uttered or thought of for the last time. This publication tries to keep alive some of the fire and the utopian ideas of this dreamer of and between languages.

THE BOOK

Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof (1859–1917) was not the only one to promote the idea of a constructed language in his time. Numerous efforts – drawing inspiration from different sources – testified to a strong desire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to create a mode of communication inspired by universal humanitarianism. Esperanto, however, is unique in its influence (Künzli 2010, Jagodzińska 2012). The following articles debate the extent to which this unique potential can be attributed to Jewish traditions of thought.

Zamenhof's work is inseparable from his personal experiences. His *Opyt gramatiki novoevrejskago jazyka (žargona)* (Outline of the Grammar of the New-Jewish Language (Jargon)), on which he worked between 1876 and 1880,[3] only to eventually discard it, and *Hilelismo. Projekto de solvo de la hebrea demando* (1901) (Hillelism: Project for the Solution of the Jewish Question), both written in Russian, form an intellectual arch that spans and embodies the development of the artificial language of Esperanto. The interrelationship between the linguistic dimension and questions of identity reveals conflicts and fissures that transcend the individual. Exposed here were the pressing problems with which Jewry, integrated into the Russian culture and living in the now Russian territory of the former Rzeczpospolita, was confronted in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The complex socio-cultural realities that shaped Zamenhof are aptly outlined by Ewa Geller in the following words: "Born in 1859 in Polish Białystok, then a major, multicultural, provincial town in the western part of the Russian Empire, Zamenhof grew up in an assimilation-friendly milieu of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskala), whose main ideals he held dear until the end of his life."[4]

2 L. L. Zamenhof: "Post la Granda Milito. Alvoko al la Diplomatoj – After the Great War. An Appeal to Diplomatists," in: *The British Esperantist*, XI (1915), 51–55.

3 Cf. Ewa Geller: "Die vielfach verkannte Jiddische Grammatik des Ludwik Zamenhof," in: Leket: Jiddistik heute, Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed, Roland Gruschka, and Simon Neuberg (eds.), Düsseldorf 2012, 393–414, here 394.

4 Ibidem.

For Zamenhof, the Russian language and culture in particular were formative, as they were his first reference points of personal identity. In his later years in Warsaw, Polish, which he spoke fluently, increasingly came to the fore. In addition, he had an impressive knowledge of German, English, French, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. With many of his patients, he probably also spoke primarily in Yiddish, his *mother* tongue (Künzli 2010, Jagodzińska 2012). The "multilingualism [seen as] natural for Eastern European Jews" and the everyday "experience with multiple languages"[5] served Zamenhof initially as the essential foundation of his linguistic studies, and eventually as the key source of inspiration for the blueprint of his constructed language.

Also essential is the recognition of the ambiguity of this identifying moment, made critical through the Jewish Diaspora and heightened by the circumstances of the Polish "nation without a state." Especially in towns such as Białystok, Polish-Russian conflicts were palpable (Künzli 2012, 26–76). The Jewish population, thrust into the middle of this conflict, was never – in the words of Joseph Roth – the proverbial winner in the quarrel between two parties. Rather, it was always the third party holding the short end of the stick. Crystalized in the Jewish experience, therefore, was the view that language constituted "the prime motor of civilization," yet also functioned as the prime cause of "antipathy, nay even of hatred, between people, as being the first thing to strike us on meeting," as Zamenhof noted in his first textbook, *Dr. Esperanto's international language*.[6]

Through his reflections on the debate about whether the "national language" of the Jewish people was to be Hebrew or Yiddish, Zamenhof revealed how important it was for him to reflect on current issues. He eventually distanced himself from both options (as he concluded in an interview for the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1907),[7] and a possible solution in the form of a planned artificial language attracted his interest. Remarkably, he framed the fundamental context as a dilemma. Nobody, according to Zamenhof in his much-cited letter to Alfred Michaux (1905),[8] could possibly feel more intensely the longing for a "neutral" universal human language than a Jew. At the same time, he feared that highlighting his Jewish identity in public might harm the cause. Yet it was precisely this identity that shaped his thinking (Jagodzińska 2012).

5 Ibidem.

6 L. L. Zamenhof, Dr. Esperanto's international language, Warsaw 1889, 4.

7 Cf. R. I[sidor], Harris, "Esperanto and Jewish Ideals," interview for the *Jewish Chronicle* with Dr. Zamenhof, in: Jewish Chronicle, September 6, 1907, 16–18.

8 L.L. Zamenhof, Letero de L. L. Zamenhof al Alfred Michaux, 21.II.1905, in: Aleksander Korĵenkov, Homarano. La vivo, verkoj kaj ideoj de d-ro L. L. Zamenhof, Kaliningrado: Sezonoj 2011, 9–17.

Given this background, it is fruitful to trace the connections between the draft of Esperanto as a constructed language and Jewish thought, which are expressed in a utopian element and in debates within Judaism respectively. Zamenhof's publication of *Proben fun a yidisher gramtik* (1910)[9], following the already widespread positive reception of his constructed language, and the Czernowitz Conference in 1908 deserve particular consideration.[10] The aforementioned interview for the *Jewish Chronicle* – appearing under the meaningful title "Esperanto and Jewish Ideals" – also is illustrative in this respect.

"In reality, the idea of a neutral language, which neither impairs nor even eradicates national languages but rather facilitates understanding amongst nations, is a Jewish idea." These are the words of B. Friedberg in his serialized three-part article, titled *Jüdische Vorkämpfer für das Menschenreich der Zukunft* (1919).[11] With these words, he gives a collective Jewish experience superior importance over individual background and origin.

The anthology begins with *Green Star. Scenes for an essay* where **Liliana Ruth Feierstein** places Zamenhof to a line of descent from what Hannah Arendt called the *hidden tradition* and Isaac Deutscher *the Non-Jewish Jew* – thus tracing Zamenhof's intellectual development back to Spinoza – she puts forward, fundamentally, four theses: the power and significance of language in the Jewish tradition, the imperative of social justice, Jewish cosmopolitanism, and the centrality of the written word (literature).

Esther Schor's contribution, also brings Zamenhof closer to the figure of Spinoza, but with regard to the issue of the boundaries of Judaism. In *Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof: Revisionist of Covenantal Judaism*, she focuses on Zamenhof's text *Hillelism: Project for the Solution of the Jewish Question*, a little-known but central testimony to modern Jewish thought and its proposal for a redefinition of the covenant for the modern age. Deeming Hillelism suited "to spread among humanity the truth of monotheism and the principles of justice and

9 In 1909/1910 Zamenhof published excerpts from his manuscript "Opyt gramatiki novoevrejskago jazyka (žargona) (1876–1880)" in the Yiddish-language journal *Leben un visnshaft*, published in Vilnius between May 1909 and the end of 1912: Part 1: "Vegn a yidisher gramatik un reform in der yidisher shprakh," in: *Leben un visenshaft* 1 (May 1909), 50–56; Part 2: "Proben fun a yidisher gramatik," in *Leben un Visenshaft* 7 (January 1910), 89–96; Part 3: "Di proben fun a yidisher gramatik. (A brif in der redaktsye)," in: *Leben un visenshaf*t 9 (March 1910), 97–104.

10 Cf. Geller, Jiddische Grammatik, 396–397.

11 B[ernhard], Friedberg, "Juedische Vorkaempfer fuer das Menschenreich der Zukunft – I. Die Religion der Voelker – II. Die Sprache der Voelker – III. Der Friede der Voelker," in: *Ost und West*, 1919, columns 11–30; 71–86, here 84; 179–198.

fraternity," Zamenhof sees here the completion of the Jewish mission, which lies in the promise of a future in which humanity will share common ethical ideals and a common language.

Perhaps it was the notion of a common language for humanity (as a means to "open the covenant") that motivated Zamenhof to shift his project from Yiddish to Esperanto. **Ewa Geller**, in *Between Language Planning and the Standard of Yiddish: L. L. Zamenhof's Ambivalent Attitude towards the "Jargon"* introduces Zamenhof as the author of the first grammar of Yiddish, in which his doubts about his *mameloshn* play a leading role: On the one hand, it is the true mother tongue of Eastern European Jews; on the other, he cannot consider Yiddish to be a Jewish national language. Therefore, he ultimately refused to advance its development into a literary language at the time.

But if not written and published in Yiddish, what role does literature play at all for Zamenhof and his followers? **Viola Beckmann**, in her contribution, assesses the relevance of literature for the development of Esperanto and specifically for the development of a language community. She examines essays that appeared in the literary journal *Literatura Mondo* in Hungary between the wars, showing that different concepts of literature and of Esperanto as a literary language are employed to negotiate whether it should be a cultural language for all or simply a form of identification for a specific group.

Language and literature need other dimensions to give form to a utopia. **Javier Alcalde's** article shifts the subject from world literature to politics. The author takes under the magnifying glass the relationship between Esperanto and the peace movements, a link that at first seems almost self-evident but, as Alcalde demonstrates, becomes more and more complicated over time and given the diversity of the historical actors. The fact that L. L. Zamenhof has been nominated eight times for the Nobel Peace Prize testifies to this elective affinity between the two movements; the fact that he was never selected represents the failure of the dialogue between them.

Zamenhof and the Esperanto movement maintained multiple relationships with representatives of diverse cultures and convictions. **J. Antonio del Barrio** offers us an unfamiliar story: the international publication history of the *Declaration on Homaranism*, a text by Zamenhof that transforms the ideals of his Hillelist religious proposal into a worldview associated with his hope for the unification of humanity. The distinctive feature of the story is that the text was published in Madrid by the Spanish military and Freemasons. By challenging the belief that the religious convictions of the master of Esperanto were avoided in Western Europe, this account not only enriches the history of the sources but also illuminates the complex relationships between actors that are not evident, at first glance, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

History was made, of course, not only by partners and friends but also by enemies of Esperanto. **Ulrich Lins**, the author of the well-known book *Dangerous Language*, raises the question of the resistance potential of Esperanto and shows how it has acquired importance in certain revolutionary contexts. Even in the early history of the language, Esperantists strove to avoid attracting political attention, and Zamenhof's universalist ideas took a back seat to a pragmatic interest. Those efforts did not prevent Esperantists from being persecuted under both Hitler and Stalin, who associated the language with Jews and subversion. In contrast to today, "Esperanto may no longer be a provocation. But it remains an inspiration to people who believe in the universality of the human spirit."[12]

Some of the shadows of those disputes have endured. The comic book *Esperanto*, published in 2014/15 by Centrum Ludovika Zamenhofa, is presented by **Lothar Quinkenstein** as a *lieu de mémoire* for Ludwik Zamenhof with regard to the concept of *histoire croisée*. In the context of Poland's history, the question of national belonging and ethnic diversity is of particular importance. These contradictions and simultaneous attempts to appropriate Zamenhof, who described himself as a Russian Jew, are reflected in current political discourses focusing on nationalism and cosmopolitanism. In his native city of Białystok, his memory emphasizes the cosmopolitan past, and thus Zamenhof is styled as a national hero. At the same time, there are tendencies toward silencing: In strictly national narratives, there is no place for cosmopolitans.

To illuminate the shadows, it is necessary to keep the records and the memories of the movement. The world's largest specialized library for interlinguistics is housed in the Planned Languages Collection at the Austrian National Library in Vienna. In addition to an extensive body of books and journals, especially from the early days of Esperanto, the collection holds archival materials of various kinds and is thus indispensable for research into the history of Esperanto and its inventor, Ludwik Zamenhof. In his article, **Bernhard Tuider**, the librarian in charge of the collection, traces its development since the founding of the Esperanto Museum in Vienna in 1927 and gives an overview of the library holdings. The author reflects on means to sustain the worldwide significance of the collection and accomplish its mission through the consistent implementation of a digitalization strategy.

12 See the contribution by Ulrich Lins in this volume, 155.

Over the years, whenever we have named Zamenhof and Esperanto as our areas of work, most listeners have smiled gently – and asked a great many questions. Some cherish a vague sympathy for this utopia but know very little about it. We hope the publication of this book will offer valuable glimpses into the history of an imaginary community that puts words before violence and therefore deserves to be remembered, no matter in which language. And we also hope for a deepening of our humanity through the most profound gift we enjoy: the wonder of language.

Viola Beckman and Liliana Ruth Feierstein
Berlin and Buenos Aires, October 2022