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THE VERBAL INHERITANCE OF GENOCIDE*

The Holocaust Through One Word: *Shabreven*

In the philological Zeitgeist of the first half of the twentieth century, analyzing words and analyzing society were often done in tandem. Major political movements from across the political spectrum, Nazism and Bolshevism among them,[1] made linguistic order a high priority. At the same time and in a very different spirit, intellectuals such as Franz Boas were articulating bold propositions about the fundamental equality of all human cultures – also via the study of language.[2] In this context of general philological interest, scholars, survivors and social commentators of all sorts turned to language as a means of interpreting the violence of the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust, both during and after the Second World War. For instance, language stood at the foundation of the 1944 definition of the concept of genocide proposed by the influential Polish-Jewish legal scholar Raphael Lemkin. As many scholars have emphasized,

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1 See Christopher M. Hutton, *Linguistics and the Third Reich. Mother-tongue Fascism, Race and the Science of Language*, London 1999; Tony Crowley, That Obscure Object of Desire: A Science of Language, in: John E. Joseph/Talbot J. Taylor (eds), *Ideologies of Language*, London 1990, pp. 27-50; A.M. Selishchev, *Iazyk revoliutsionnoi epokhi. Iz nabliudenii nad russkim iazykom poslednikh let (1917–1926) [Language in a Revolutionary Period. From Observations on the Russian Language in Recent Years (1917–1926)]*, Moscow 1928.

2 E.g. Roman Jakobson, Franz Boas' Approach to Language, in: *International Journal of American Linguistics* 10 (1939/44), pp. 188-195, here pp. 190-191.

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Lemkin defined ›genocide‹ not merely as a synonym for massive, racially motivated violence, but as an attack on the cultural and social matter that binds people together as a group.[3] Genocide, according to Lemkin, destroys not only human beings but systems of being human. Among the non-biological parameters of genocide that Lemkin delineates, language is central.[4]

Since Lemkin's early propositions, considerable progress has been made in examining the disappearance of languages as an outcome of genocide, or ›language death‹ in general.[5] However, much of this research relies on quantitative or binary terms: There is either a surviving speaker of the language, or there is not. Children are either educated in their indigenous tongue, or they are not. A language is either present or absent, spoken or not spoken. These areas of focus are understandable in legal and political arenas, where clear categories are necessary for action. However, because of this emphasis, there is often not enough consideration of how a genocide-afflicted language can remain present, functioning, but also become radically altered. This article attempts to fill this gap by looking at the case of Khurbn Yiddish (Yiddish of the Holocaust),[6] and one neologism from this sociolect in particular.

The idea of studying Holocaust-Yiddish as a way to explore the intangible aspects of genocide is not entirely new but arose, in fact, during the WWII period. In parallel to Lemkin's broad conceptual treatise on genocide, there was a lively discourse among Yiddishists about the new words, phrases and modes of speech that had come into being during the Holocaust. People from various walks of life saw the recording and

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3 Leora Bilsky/Rachel Klagsbrun, The Return of Cultural Genocide?, in: *European Journal of International Law* 29 (2018), pp. 373-396; A. Dirk Moses, Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide, in: Donald Bloxham/A. Dirk Moses (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, New York 2010, pp. 19-40.

4 In his well-known treatise of 1944, Lemkin outlines eight different techniques of genocide: political, social, cultural, economic, biological, physical, religious and moral. In explaining these modes of genocidal destruction, Lemkin cites events related to language in five out of his eight categories. Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe. Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*, Washington 1944, Clark 2005, pp. 79, 82, 84. See Thomas M. Butcher, A ›Synchronized Attack‹: On Raphael Lemkin's Holistic Conception of Genocide, in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 15 (2013), pp. 253-271.

5 Israel W. Charny, Toward a Generic Definition of Genocide, in: George J. Andreopoulos (ed.), *Genocide. Conceptual and Historical Dimensions*, Philadelphia 1994, pp. 64-94, here p. 85; David Crystal, *Language Death*, Cambridge, Mass. 2002, esp. pp. 1-26, 76; Tove Skutnabb-Kangas/Robert Dunbar, *Indigenous Children's Education as Linguistic Genocide and a Crime Against Humanity? A Global View*, Kautokeino 2010; Andrew Dalby, *Language in Danger. The Loss of Linguistic Diversity and the Threat to our Future*, New York 2013; Richard R. Day, The Ultimate Inequality: Linguistic Genocide, in: Nessa Wolfson/Joan Manes (eds), *Language of Inequality*, Berlin 2012, pp. 163-181. Regarding Yiddish specifically: Neil G. Jacobs, *Yiddish. A Linguistic Introduction*, Cambridge, Mass. 2005.

6 Hannah Pollin-Galay, »A Rubric of Pain Words«: Mapping Atrocity with Holocaust Yiddish Glossaries, in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 110 (2020), pp. 161-193. Linguist Agata Kondrat defines these new Yiddish words as a ›sociolect‹: Agata Kondrat, Nachmana Blumentala »Werter un wertlech fun der churbn-tkufe« – spojrzenie językoznawcze [Nachman Blumental's »Words and Expressions from the Holocaust Period« – a Linguistic Perspective], in: *Kwartalnik Historii Zydów [Jewish History Quarterly]* 257 (2016), pp. 169-183.

analysis of Khurbn Yiddish as a means of testimony and self-reflection. These Khurbn Yiddishists sought not only to understand the new words invented under Nazism, but also to preserve and even elevate them as valuable cultural material. This rather nonintuitive impulse to preserve such Holocaust vocabulary suggests that victim language can serve not only as proof of genocidal destruction, but also as a means of reclaiming victim agency. One quirky, contentious and highly discussed Khurbn Yiddish word will help guide us through these broad claims and queries: *shabreven*, which translates approximately as ›looting‹ or ›collecting unattended property for the sake of one's own survival‹. This word inspired in-depth commentary among Yiddish speakers both during and after the war. Questions around *shabreven* encircled both ethics and etymology, often at the same time: Did this word refer to a legitimate survival technique or an act of abominable greed? Did it stem from Hebrew, from Polish, or from German? Moreover, how did it feel to use this word? What were the *pragmatics* – the modes of speaking and behaving – that came with *shabreven*? Complex in both its meaning and its history, *shabreven* adds nuance to the idea of genocide through lingual destruction and helps explain the ethical thrust behind Khurbn Yiddish philology.

Using postwar analysis of *shabreven* as a starting point, my article then winds back the clock to examine the ways in which ghetto prisoners reflected on the word during the Holocaust years. Given that these ghetto discussants placed weight on the etymology of the term, I expand on their guesswork by exploring the history of *shabreven* from before the war as well. Finally, the article examines two postwar epilogues of the term – one in Polish and one in the Yiddish-Hebrew discourse of Jews in Palestine around 1945. I present both of these *shabreven* afterstories as cultural mistranslations, which maintain the semantic shell of the word, while emptying it of the dynamic victim subjectivity that the word contained in Yiddish during the Holocaust. In sum, tracking the journey of *shabreven* shows Khurbn Yiddish lexicography to be an important anti-genocidal intervention, a means of reinvigorating the dignity and the dynamism of East European Jewry.

1. On the Preservationist Impulse of Khurbn Yiddish Researchers

In 1947, the Germanophone philologist Victor Klemperer wrote a memoir-cum-lexicon entitled *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (LTI, The Language of the Third Reich) in which he traced the metamorphosis of the German language under Nazism. As one aim of his writing, Klemperer sought to illuminate Nazi-influenced words precisely in order to eliminate them: ›Many words in common usage during the Nazi period should be committed to a mass grave for a very long time, some forever.‹[7] Klemperer was not

7 Victor Klemperer, *LTI*, trans. Martin Brady, London 2000, p. 14. See Nicolas Berg's contribution to this issue.

alone among German intellectuals in seeking denazification through the lexicon.[8] On the whole, these dictionaries or glossaries sought to teach people how *not* to speak German. They aimed to locate and uproot Nazi words from postwar German culture.

Around the same time that these German intellectuals were composing and publishing their studies on Nazi speech, another equally robust yet far less known discourse on wartime language was also taking place regarding the Yiddish language. Among those researching Yiddish of the Holocaust was Nachman Blumental, a teacher and cultural activist who, as early as 1944, set to work collecting new words and phrases that had entered the Yiddish language under Nazism.[9] Israel Kaplan, an activist-survivor from Kovna, undertook a similar project – recording the metamorphosis of Yiddish under Nazi rule. He first published his lexicon serially between 1946 and 1948 and then in book form in 1949, calling his collection *Jewish Folk Expressions from the Nazi Yoke* (*Dos folksmoyl fun Natsi klem*).[10] Likewise, across the Soviet border, the Yiddish linguist Elye Spivak authored a book entitled *The Language in the Days of the Great Patriotic War* (*Di shprakh in di teg fun der foterlendisher milkhome*), published in Kyiv in 1946.[11] In addition to these extensive glossaries, there are at least ten shorter ones that appeared in publications from displaced persons camps and as appendices to early history books.[12]

Each lexicographer or commentator reflecting on Khurbn Yiddish had a different set of intellectual, personal and ideological stakes. Yet, on the whole, there was a crucial difference between these postwar studies of Khurbn Yiddish and their parallels focused on Nazi German. Whereas Klemperer and his peers studied Nazi German words in order to eradicate them, the Khurbn Yiddishists wrote about these words in order to preserve them – in memory, if not in use. In a public speech introducing his Khurbn Yiddish project in 1945, Israel Kaplan described his word collection as a valuable cultural asset, equivalent to the ethnographic collections of people like S. Ansky,

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8 Dolf Sternberger/Gerhard Storz/Wilhelm E. Süskind, *Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen*, Hamburg 1957, p. 9.

9 N[achman] Blumental, Verter un verterlekh fun der khurbn tkufe [Words and Expressions from the Holocaust Period], in: *Yidishe sphrakh* 16.1–24.1 (1956–64), and republished as: *Verter un vertlekh fun der khurbn tkufe*, Tel Aviv 1981. The series that appeared in *Yidishe sphrakh* 16.1–24.1 (1956–64) only reached the letter ›zayin‹. I thus rely on the 1981 edition for the rest of the letters of the alphabet. See also Katrin Stoll, Producing an Antisemitic Consensus within the Framework of the *Judenjagd*: The Role of Poles in the Holocaust Based on the Murder of Nachman Blumental's Family in Wielopole Skrzyńskie during the German Occupation, in: *Studia Litteraria et Historica* 10 (2021), and Karolina Szymaniak, »No Innocent Words«: Nachman Blumental's Metaphorology Project and the Cultural History of the Holocaust, in: *East European Jewish Affairs* 51 (2021), pp. 106-126.

10 Israel Kaplan, *Dos folksmoyl fun Natsi klem [Jewish Folk Expressions from the Nazi Yoke]*, Munich 1949. Republished under the same title in 1982 (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighter's House). Some parts published earlier in the journal *Fun letstn khurbn* 1946–1948. The journal has been anthologized in German translation: Frank Beer/Markus Roth (eds), *Von der letzten Zerstörung. Die Zeitschrift »Fun letstn churbn« der Jüdischen Historischen Kommission in München 1946–1948*, Gießen 2020.

11 Elye Spivak, *Di shprakh in di teg fun der foterlendisher milkhome (etyuden) [The Language in the Days of the Great Patriotic War (Studies)]*, Kyiv 1946.

12 See Pollin-Galay, »A Rubric of Pain Words« (fn 6), p. 165, fn 21.

who famously based his legendary play *The Dybbuk* on folkloric material he had collected in Galicia. Kaplan ended his speech with a rallying cry: ›People can bear witness... Help save our inheritance!‹[13] As examples of this verbal ›inheritance‹, Kaplan lists words like *klepsi-klepsi* (theft), *organizirn* (theft) and *muselman* (Musselman, literally ›Muslim‹, used in this context to refer to a camp prisoner who has been reduced to a barely living skeleton). In a similar spirit, Blumental recalls that he began recording words for his dictionary once he heard how ›wonderful and incomprehensible‹ survivors' Yiddish sounded to him after the war.[14] Looking at Khurbn Yiddish through this dual lens – wonder and incomprehensibility – Blumental analyzed this new verbal material both forensically, as evidence of a crime, as well as aesthetically, as a new type of folk poetics. Elye Spivak, for his part, sought to integrate Yiddish neologisms created under Nazi occupation into a new and improved version of the Yiddish language, which would also include heroic neologisms coined by Jews while fighting in the Red Army.[15]

The level of dedication that Blumental, Kaplan, Spivak and others showed in collecting and presenting Holocaust Yiddish vocabulary should, perhaps, strike us as odd. If we consider lingual corruption a mark of genocide, it would have made more sense for postwar Yiddishists to focus on disseminating correct language, thus reversing the effects of Nazi destruction on their culture.[16] Analyzing the postwar discourse around Khurbn Yiddish, we should ask: Why were these lexicographers committed to preserving the stamp of genocide on their language? What might have been the special value in this act of philological remembrance? To explore this question, as well as the concrete dynamics of genocide and language on the whole, let us now turn to the biography of one specific Khurbn Yiddish word, the verb *shabreven* (sometimes *shabern*).

2. Khurbn Yiddishists' Commentary on *Shabreven*

Nachman Blumental lists *shabern*, *shabrirn* (also *shabreven*) among his collection of hundreds of Khurbn Yiddish neologisms, and defines the word with an exceptionally long entry, two pages in total (his average gloss is about seven lines). Blumental's initial gloss reads as follows: ›taking ownerless [*hefker*] property, and also stealing‹.[17] The ›and‹ in this definition already points to a dilemma: How and when is ›taking

13 Israel Kaplan, notebook titled ›Geto un katset folklor [Ghetto and Camp Folklore]‹, private collection of Sholem Eilati, pp. 4-5. Entry dated 29 July 1945.

14 Blumental, *Verter* (fn 9), p. 7.

15 Spivak, *Di shprakh in di teg* (fn 11), pp. 27-28.

16 This is the response of some, such as H. Leivick, With the Saving Remnant [1947], trans. Solomon Beinfeld, in: Samuel D. Kassow/David G. Roskies (eds), *The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization, Vol. 9: Catastrophe and Rebirth, 1939–1973*, New Haven 2020, p. 863.

17 Blumental, *Verter* (fn 9), p. 304.

ownerless property‹ different from ›stealing‹? If these are distinct acts, on different moral planes, then why are they contained in the same word? We learn from Blumental that the term originated in the Warsaw Ghetto and was used to describe the taking of property from the homes of deported Jews. In this context, the question arises: When is it permissible or practical to take property that has been left behind, and when does such an act constitute genocidal collaboration? If it is illegal for Jews to live and thrive, how can Jewish language distinguish between just and unjust means of sustaining livelihood? Thus, even a perfunctory attempt to offer an initial, literal definition requires this profound sense of ›and‹ – of ambiguity.

Other postwar glossarists, including Israel Kaplan, also grapple with the moral duality that *shabern* presents. Kaplan tries to clarify matters by adding a temporal dimension: he claims that the word initially referred only to the gathering of property abandoned by those deported from the Warsaw ghetto, but ›over time, this *shabern* spread throughout Poland and any kind of wheeling and dealing [*aynhandlen*] came to be called *shabreven*‹.[18] The insertion of the extra syllable, according to Kaplan, corresponded with the term's semantic and geographic expansion.

Postwar glosses, analyses and commentaries on *shabern* and *shabreven* abound.[19] The specific nuance of each gloss is perhaps less significant than the intricacy and passion with which each commentator commits to the task of illuminating this word. In his memoir of the Warsaw Ghetto, the actor and writer Jonas Turkow discusses *shabreven* alongside a scathing condemnation of the practice, arguing that it proved how self-serving, thuggish behavior had become normalized among the privileged ghetto elite.[20] Offering a different perspective, survivor-scholar Benjamin Orenstein dissects the term in a long entry in his study *Social Problems among Jews in the Nazi Period*, which resembles a dictionary in its organization around key terms.[21] Here Orenstein cites Rabbi Hillel Seidman's positive view on the practice of *shabreven*. Instead of using the term to speak of maleficent looters, Seidman depicts jobless Yeshiva youths who were lucky enough to ›benefit from ownerless property/*zoykhe zayn min ha-hefker*‹.[22]

Taking the issue beyond Warsaw, Orenstein then points out that close synonyms for *shabreven* existed in many places – he cites *paseven* from other ghettos in Poland and *labern* in Lithuania – all of which referred to that morally hazy zone between stealing and utilizing abandoned property. As if negotiating a compromise to an intricate communal debate, Orenstein concludes his gloss diplomatically: ›The expression SHABREVEN cannot be used as a general concept, but must be separated into two varieties: 1. ***Shabreven*** – stealing for personal enrichment. 2. ***Shabreven*** – arranging

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18 Kaplan, *Dos folksmoyl* (fn 10), p. 29.

19 E.g. Rokhl Auerbach, *Varshever tsavoes [Warsaw Testaments]*, Tel Aviv 1974, p. 355.

20 Jonas Turkow, *Azoy iz es geven (Khurbn Varshe) [This Is How It Was (The Destruction of Warsaw)]*, Buenos Aires 1948, pp. 400-402.

21 Benjamin Orenstein, *Sotsiale problemen ba yidn in der Nazi epokhe [Social Problems among Jews in the Nazi Period]*, Montreal 1964.

22 Hillel Seidman, *Tog bukh fun varshaver geto [Diary from the Warsaw Ghetto]*, Buenos Aires 1947, p. 110.

material means for collective demands and community needs.‹[23] It seems that Orenstein goes to such great lengths, both visually and rhetorically, to draw a line between the ethical and unethical sides of *shabreven* precisely because that line did not exist, or at least was constantly in motion.

Shabreven not only evoked fascination among postwar Yiddish speakers; it also inspired lively discussion in the Warsaw Ghetto during the war years. In general, Jewish prisoners in ghettos and camps expressed a conscious interest in the ways that their language was changing in real time.[24] This was especially the case with *shabreven*. In two separate documents that have been preserved, Warsaw ghetto prisoners use *shabreven* as a vessel of testimony, a means of examining their own suffering as it unfolds. One is a short text that combines personal biography and lexicography, entitled *Shabrovnikes* (those who participate in *shabreven*) and created as part of the Oyneg Shabbes Archive, a large-scale, underground testimonial project in the Warsaw Ghetto, led by Emanuel Ringelblum.[25] The term *shabrovnik* is defined as if in a dictionary, and then exemplified by the *lebns-geshikhte* (life story) of 18-year-old orphan Dovid Bryner as relayed through an anonymous interviewer, transcriber and editor.

Bryner tells that, having lost his entire family, including his parents, during the Great Deportation,[26] he initially supported himself by going to a *platsuvke*, a Khurbn Yiddish word denoting a place of work outside the ghetto. But eventually that work assignment ended and, in what appears to be a dramatic turning point in this boy's life, Bryner and a friend began to practice *shabreven*. As he puts it, ›The two of us went out every day, searching every nook and cranny. We found our own system – first cellars, then attics.‹[27] Bryner catalogues the various items they managed to find as well as the price at which he was able to sell them. In the midst of this detailed account, Bryner inserts a somewhat belligerent comment to his interviewer: ›You're looking at me as if I've always been a *shabrovnik*, a wild child [*voyler yung*]. I used to go about my business as a quiet, solid kid.‹[28] For Bryner, the word seems to signify the gap between who he was before the war and who he is now, how he sees his own character changing and how people see him from the outside. Bryner tells us what it is like to live inside *shabreven*, to be the object of collective ethical anxiety and to feel the shifty aura of the word as part of one's own self-image. In this sense, the word helps him to tell his story, to recognize his own survival skills – even though it also embarrasses him.

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23 Orenstein, *Sotsiale problemen* (fn 21), pp. 16-18.

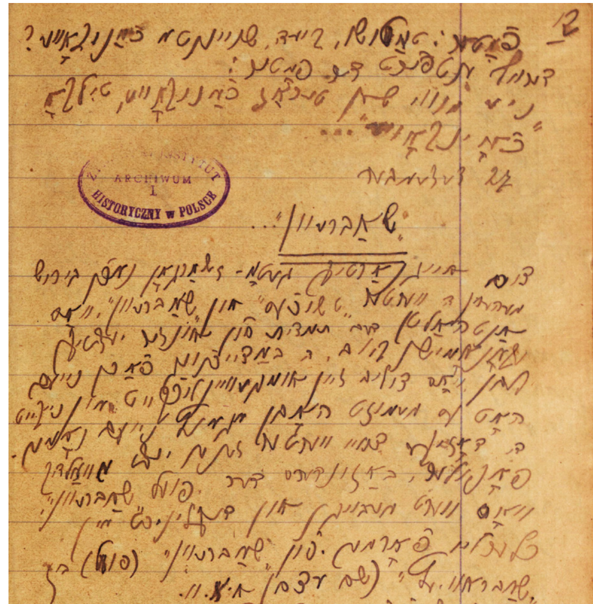
24 E.g. Oskar Rosenfeld, Encyclopedia of the Ghetto, in: Adam Sitarek/Ewa Wiatr (eds), *Encyclopedia of the Ghetto. The Unfinished Project of the Łodź Ghetto Archivists*, trans. Katarzyna Gucio, Łukasz Pręs and Robert M. Shapiro, Łodź 2016, pp. 5-6.

25 Dovid Bryner, Shabrovnikes, July 1942, Ring. II/170, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Underground Archives of the Warsaw Ghetto: Ringelblum Archives, p. 1.

26 Art. ›Warsaw Ghetto Uprising‹, in: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Holocaust Encyclopedia, URL: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw-ghetto-uprising>.

27 Bryner, Shabrovnikes (fn 25), p. 2.

28 Ibid.



Part of the essay entitled ›Shabreven‹ from the Warsaw Ghetto diary of Perec Opoczyński (Perec Opoczyński, Varshever geto-khronik [Warsaw Ghetto Chronicle], September 1942, Ring. II/289, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Underground Archives of the Warsaw Ghetto: Ringelblum Archives)

Strikingly, this 18-year-old boy was not alone in reflecting on the term *shabreven* at this moment in the Warsaw Ghetto. The Yiddish journalist and writer Perec Opoczyński, by all appearances independently, inserts a six-page essay entitled *Shabreven* into his diary in 1942 – an essay that Blumental cites at length in his gloss of the term. As with the young Dovid Bryner, Opoczyński incorporated lexicography, the gloss and analysis of *shabreven*, into his personal and communal narrative.[29] This essay appears after five notebooks filled with dated entries about the horrors of the Great Deportation and its aftermath, in which 265,000 Jews were deported from the ghetto and 35,000 killed. It is as if Opoczyński turned to lexicography at his first moment of calm. As soon as he has a pause in which he can witness his new state of crisis, this word enables him to do this.

Opoczyński writes, ›The words *tshukhes* and *shabreven* belong to that special post-expulsion [1942] vocabulary that contains the essence of our current economic existence.‹ The second term that appears in this discussion, *tshukhes*, is the object of *shabreven*: that which is typically ›taken‹ or ›looted‹. These *tshukhes*, clothes or rags that were extracted from ghetto houses, were then sold, mostly to Poles outside the ghetto walls.[30] The fact that Opoczyński defines one Khurbn Yiddish word through

29 Perec Opoczyński, Varshever geto-khronik [Warsaw Ghetto Chronicle], September 1942, Ring. II/289, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Underground Archives of the Warsaw Ghetto: Ringelblum Archives.

30 Ibid., pp. 87-90.

another is important, as it shows that Khurbn Yiddish had become an interconnected system of new meanings rather than just isolated lexical additions. According to Opoczyński, these words were not only critical for understanding the current moment in which he was living; they also deserved a place in a future Yiddish culture: ›One could say that these two terms shine a spotlight on our current way of life. *Tshukhes* and *shabreven* – these expressions will enter the Yiddish language as a paradigmatic sign [*simen muvhak*] of this period, as cornerstones of the ghetto mentality.‹[31]

Advancing beyond the semantic, documentary value of these words, Opoczyński also explores how people behaved with this new sort of language, what it felt like to use it. He goes into detail regarding the pragmatics, the ›how-to‹ of *shabreven* especially. ›Most of the time, the *shabrovnikes* themselves are the ones who use this term in order to cover up their supposed shame. At first, people said »*ganeyve, ganovim*/stealing, thieves« in simple Yiddish. But perhaps those who proclaimed »thieves« felt they were themselves accused by the term – they too took things from houses and would never want to bear the title »thief«; or they simply recognized that it's nonsense to call it theft when you take something that's ownerless.‹[32]

Opoczyński's description echoes the testimony of 18-year-old Bryner on the same topic. Opoczyński sees that the word is used both to describe a new reality and to cover up that new reality. It is both a manipulation to call ›theft‹ *shabreven* and ›nonsense‹ to do otherwise. The term is both accurate, descriptive, as well as euphemistic. In a sense, what Opoczyński implies is that one must speak euphemistically in order to participate in speech at this moment, especially regarding property, ownership and the law: lacking any stable framework of judgement, words that described theft and non-theft could refer only to one another in a kind of endless loop. A direct, seemingly referential word like ›thief‹ would be dishonest here, since there is actually no moral or legal grid to which the term could refer. As in Bryner's testimony, the word *shabreven* here enables a process of social reflection for Opoczyński.

Opoczyński goes on to describe a situation in which the relationship between words and material reality remains undecided, in constant flux. He captures this dynamic with a vivid metaphor: ›People are using the word every which way, whether they need to or not; they roll it and they drop it. They play around with it in this manner like children play with a ball, throwing it in the air.‹[33] Opoczyński then exemplifies this verbal bouncing with a dialogue: ›You, watcha' carrying, did you *shabrevet*? – one person said to another, seeing him carrying something under his arm. – Ay, you old *shabrovyets* – the second answers – do you think everyone is like you?‹[34]

The first speaker evokes the term playfully, as if sharing a code word among insiders, a wink among friends. But the second speaker declines this invitation to speak together in the same code – even though it is he who appears to be in the process

31 Opoczyński, Varshever geto-khronik (fn 29), p. 87.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., p. 88.
34 Ibid.

of stealing. Thus, in terms of ethical status and social acceptability, *shabreven* does indeed seem to bounce around like a ball in this conversation, moving among different social assumptions and ethical frameworks. Through his metaphor and his example, Opoczyński enables *shabreven* to archive the feeling of speech in the ghetto, where meaning is constantly on the run.

Opoczyński was also preoccupied with the etymology of *shabreven*. There appears to have been some debate about this in the ghetto. He surmises, ›The root of the word seems to come from *shaber* (small stones) and the term appears in Polish technical terminology as a way of saying »sifting and prodding through« (locksmith terms).‹[35] Some Khurbn Yiddish commentators, however, projected a very different history onto the word *shabreven*, asserting that the term came from the Hebraic *shavar*. While the obvious association with this Hebrew root would be with the word ›break‹, its primary and most common definition, some in the ghetto associated the term with a completely different Hebraic possibility. As a separate root, the same letter combination, *shavar*, can also mean ›food, to buy grain [or corn]‹[36] – a far more positive association for *shabreven*.

Abraham Lewin, also writing from within the Warsaw ghetto, weighs this possible etymology among others as part of his discussion of *shabreven*, one of many words that ›were reborn in the Warsaw ghetto‹. ›One guy tried to convince me that the term comes from Hebrew, »the sons of Jacob descended to Egypt to buy wheat [*Ve-yardu bnei ya'akov mitsrayma lishbor bar*]«.‹[37] The ›guy‹ in Lewin's story provides an approximate quotation, perhaps based on memory, of a sentence from the book of Genesis, 42:3: ›*Ve-yardu ahei-yosef asara lishbor bar mimitsrayim.*/And Joseph's ten brethren went down to buy [from the root of *shavar*] corn in Egypt.‹[38] In this biblical context, the word appears as a legitimate, law-abiding means of acquiring sustenance in a time of need. Thus, this etymological claim also casts a clear moral judgement on the term in question.

But Lewin ultimately rejects this biblical etymology suggested by an anonymous ›guy‹, arguing instead that ›The origin of the word is German, which then passed into Polish.‹ In keeping with the notion that the word derives from German sources, rather than Hebrew, Lewin then condemns *shabreven* as a type of collaboration with Nazi Germans. Lewin asserts that the term means ›taking objects of value [...] from the remaining Jewish apartments, where Germans had already robbed all the property that was left in them‹.[39] Lewin accused the Jews who physically extracted the goods from apartments, as well as the Poles to whom they sold the items, of acting as middlemen in the Nazis' massive act of robbery. So, too, those who uttered the word *shabreven* were

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35 Ibid., p. 87 (parentheses in the original).

36 Elieser Ben Yehuda, *Milon halashon ha'ivrit [Dictionary of the Hebrew Language]*, Vol. 14, Jerusalem 1952, p. 6867.

37 Abraham Lewin, Diary, 1942, p. 104, Ringelblum Archives II/1202, cited in: Blumental, *Verter* (fn 9), p. 304.

38 King James translation.

39 Lewin, Diary (fn 37), 29 December 1942, p. 47.

middlemen in the mental and verbal corruption perpetrated by the Nazis. The word's etymology and its semantics, in Lewin's gloss, seem inseparable. More broadly, Lewin's diary entry suggests that people were debating the etymology of the word within the Warsaw ghetto, in real time.

While Lewin and other Jews in the Warsaw ghetto may have been curious about the etymology of *shabreven*, they possessed no real means of researching the history of the term. Their hypotheses were based on instinct and on language memory. This etymological guesswork was important; it was a practice that turned the word into a vehicle of cultural continuity, a lens through which ghetto Jews could imagine their current language, undergoing changes due to Nazi rule, as nonetheless connected to their communal past. This is yet another way in which the term *shabreven* was both a result of genocidal violence as well as a means of counteracting the effects of genocide. Jews used *shabreven* to give themselves a sense of history while their history was being erased.

3. On the Etymology of *Shabreven*

Using present-day resources, it is possible to check the hypotheses of Lewin and his peers regarding the etymology of *shabreven*. When we do so, oddly enough, we discover that all of the different proposed etymologies of the word seem to have been correct: *shabreven* may have, in fact, come from Polish, German, biblical Hebrew and older Yiddish – at different stages. A famous nineteenth-century study of the German underworld entitled *Das Deutsche Gaunerthum* by the criminologist Friedrich Christian Benedict Avé-Lallemant documents the well-known phenomenon of Rotwelsch, a Germanic sociolect used by non-Jewish vagabonds, often considered thieves, that incorporated many Hebraic terms.[40] These Hebraic words became known to non-Jewish Germans via the local use of Yiddish, which always had a strong Hebraic component to it.[41] Avé-Lallemant's extensive dictionary of Rotwelsch, which he compiled to aid criminologists, does indeed list the root שבר, transliterated as *Schobar*. Here, he includes both the meaning of ›breaking‹ as well as that of ›fruit, harvest‹.[42] As a sign that the term may have remained in the lexicon of the German underworld long after the publication of Avé-Lallemant's book, and well into the twentieth century, a Nazi researcher named Johann von Leers writes about the German term *ausgeschabbert* as late as 1944, as a synonym for ›breaking in‹, and as an example of ›Jewish thieves'

40 Friedrich Christian Benedict Avé-Lallemant, *Das Deutsche Gaunerthum in seiner social-politischen, literarischen und linguistischen Ausbildung zu seinem heutigen Bestande*, 4 vols, Leipzig 1858–1862. See also Martin Puchner, *The Language of Thieves. My Family's Obsession with a Secret Code the Nazis Tried to Eliminate*, New York 2021.

41 Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred. Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*, Baltimore 1986, pp. 68-85.

42 Avé-Lallement, *Gaunerthum* (fn 40), vol. 3, p. 463.

language‹.[43] Thus, the Hebraic-Yiddish root *shavar* may have had a lasting impact on the German language. However, to make matters more complicated, there is an additional possible root for *schabber* or *ausgeschabbert*, one that incidentally resembles the Hebraic-Yiddish root and carries a vaguely similar meaning. This is the mundane German word *schaben*, which means ›to shave or scrape‹, and which also became a technical term for locksmiths. Thus, the German word *schaber* had two, potentially overlapping, roots, one exogenous, from Hebrew (*shavar* – to break or to buy) and one, endogenous, from within German (*schaben* – to shave), both of which led to the same semantic area: breaking or cutting, albeit with different nuances.

The same word, spelled *szaber*, also appears in the Polish language, in which it existed since the nineteenth century as a practical term related to stones and bricklaying, while acquiring connotations of Jewish thievery and the underworld in the twentieth century.[44] However, in both of these senses, the term seems to have remained extremely rare until after World War II.

Likewise, for Polish speakers outside the ghetto during World War II, *szaber* seems to have maintained both the minor status and the connotations that it carried in the prewar years. Within the ghetto, where Yiddish and Polish often intermingled, one can find instances of Jewish Polish speakers using *szaber*.[45] However, *szaber* does not seem to have been used by non-Jewish Poles outside of the ghettos in any meaning that comes close to that of ghetto Yiddish – looting or taking ownerless possessions. For example, in a book on the Polish Warsaw Uprising of 1944, Jerzy Pytlakowski writes, ›From mid-September, hunger began spreading in the army. At that time, the soldiers had to invent »tricks« – the word *szaber* was then unknown.‹[46] A wartime source corroborates this suggestion that *szaber*, as questionably justified looting, was not in use outside the ghetto during the war. In the well-known diary of Zygmunt Klukowski, a doctor from Szczebrzeszyn, *szaber* does in fact appear, but only in the sense of small, fragmented stones, in a description of the way in which military vehicles damaged streets in 1941.[47] No less noteworthy are the places where Klukowski

43 Johann von Leers, *Die Verbrechernatur der Juden*, Berlin 1944, p. 66; see also Joel Fishman, The Postwar Career of Nazi Ideologue Johann von Leers, aka Omar Amin, the »First-Ranking German« in Nasser's Egypt, in: *Jewish Political Studies Review* 26 (2014), issue 3-4, pp. 54-72.

44 E.g. Samuel Bogumił Linde, *Słownik języka polskiego [Dictionary of the Polish Language]*, Warsaw 1812, p. 50; Jan Karłowicz/Adam Kryński/Władysław Niedźwiedzki (eds), *Vol. VI: S – Ś, Słownik języka polskiego [Dictionary of the Polish Language]*, Warsaw 1915, under the entry *szaber*. Henryk Ułaszyn, Wojna i Język. Słownictwo Polskie z Drugiej Wojny Światowej [Polish Vocabulary from the Second World War], in: *Dissertations of Language Committee of Lodz Learned Society* 5 (1957) pp. 7-41, here p. 38; Agnieszka Małocha, Żydowskie zapożyczenia leksykalne w socjolekcie przestępczym [Jewish Lexical Borrowings in the Criminal Sociolect], in: Janusz Anusiewicz/Bogdan Siciński (eds), *Języki subkultur [Subculture Languages]*, Wrocław 1994, pp. 135-170.

45 E.g. in the diary of Jan Mawult (Stanisław Gombiński), July – September 1942, in: Michał Grynberg, *Pamiętniki z getta warszawskiego. Fragmenty i regesty [Diaries from the Warsaw Ghetto. Excerpts and Registers]*, Warsaw 1988, p. 342. More examples in Blumental, *Verter* (fn 9), pp. 304-305.

46 Jerzy Pytlakowski, *Powstanie mokotowskie. Reportaż [Mokotów Uprising. Reportage]*, Czytelnik 1946, p. 26.

47 Zygmunt Klukowski, *Zamojszczyzna 1918–1959 [Zamość Region 1918–1959]*, Warsaw 2017, p. 273.

does *not* use *szaber*. Throughout the month of October 1942, he extensively details how Polish citizens looted Jewish property upon expulsion. However, the term *szaber* never appears in this context in his writings about looting. In other words, the highly popular wartime use of the word *shaber/shabreven* in the sense of looting or taking ownerless property seems to have been unique to the Yiddish-Polish combination that was spoken in the Warsaw ghetto.

In addition to its Hebraic, German and Polish prewar etymologies, *shaber* also makes a marginal appearance in prewar Yiddish. While absent from some thesauri and lexicons, the term spelled שברן does appear in Alexander Harkavy's dictionary from 1928, defined as ›to break in, break open‹, and marked as being a part of thieves' slang. But instances of usage, based on a digital word search, appear few and far between.[48] In relation to the underworld, the word *shaber* appears in the well-known play *Ganovim* (Thieves), written by Fišl Bimko in 1919, as the name of a character.[49] Some years later, in 1923, *shaber* makes a stronger showing in the Yiddish book *Ba undz yidn* (Among Us Jews). The word appears in three different thieves' songs, each time in the sense of a crowbar or similar tool.[50] In this same volume, *shaber* also appears in a lexicon of Yiddish ›jargons‹, with a definition highly similar to that which appeared in the German lexicon compiled by Friedrich Christian Benedict Avé-Lallemant.[51] This similarity was not by chance: in his introduction to this lexicon of Yiddish jargon, its compiler Yitskhok Trivaks cites Avé-Lallemant as a source of inspiration. Thus, ironically, Trivaks, a Yiddish philologist, may very well have learned about the Yiddish *shaber* by studying a German book written the previous century. Overall, as a term connected to the underworld, *shaber* has a documented, yet marginal, prewar presence. By contrast, *shaber* appears in prewar Yiddish more often in different senses: as gravel or breakage,[52] grain or wheat.[53] One author, Noah Kaplan, summarized the duality of the word in a book of biblical interpretations: ›*Shaber* means food; and *shaber* means a break. In other words, the word represents the idea of »breaking down stingy people and feeding the poor«.‹[54] On the whole, all of the variations of *shaber* seem to have had a pre-Holocaust presence in Yiddish that was faint, yet enough that the dual connotations of *breaking/stealing* and *nourishing/sustaining* could have been accessible to some in the ghetto.

48 Yiddish Book Center's Full-Text Search, Jochre, URL: <https://ocr.yiddishbookcenter.org>.

49 Alexander Harkavy, *Yidish–English–Hebreyisher Verterbukh [Yiddish–English–Hebrew Dictionary]*, New York 1928, p. 159.

50 M. Wanwild (Moyshe Yosef Dikshteyn) (ed.), *Ba unz yi(u)dn. Zamlbukh far folklor un filologye [Among us Jews. Anthology of Folklore and Philology]*, Warsaw 1923, p. 21. I learned of the existence of this book from a lecture by Avraham Novershtern, ›The Underworld in Yiddish Culture‹ at Tel Aviv University, 22 July 2021.

51 Ibid., p. 166.

52 E.g. I.L. Peretz, *Ale verk [All Works]*, vol. 13, Vilne 1925, p. 182. Here he translates Lamentations 3:16 ›He has broken my teeth on gravel‹ as *mit shaber brekht er mir di tseyn*.

53 Yehoshua Hana Rawnitski, *Yudishe vitsen [Jewish Jokes]*, Berlin 1922, p. 195.

54 Noah Kaplan, *Seyfer Teyves Noah al hamishah humshe Torah [The Ark of Noah. On the Five Books of Moses]*, Brooklyn 1940, p. 18.

Given these etymological traces, it seems that the distinct meaning of ›looting or taking ownerless possessions‹, as the definition of *shabreven, shabern,* was indeed an invention of the Warsaw Ghetto. Ghetto commentators like Lewin and Opoczyński were thus correct in both assessing the word *shaber/shabreven* as a ghetto creation while also intuiting a complex history for the term from before the war. The word felt both new and uncannily familiar, overpopulated with meaning, but also difficult to define. Looking at the etymology of *shabreven,* we note how the term traveled from Hebrew through Yiddish to German and on to Polish, and then back into Yiddish, layering different routes and meanings on top of one another. Given this circuitous history, Opoczyński seems all the more astute to have described the term using the metaphor of a bouncy rubber ball, a word that moved about between different semantic fields. It is a term that connotes a state of both ethical and cultural flux. Thus, *shabreven,* in its ghetto usage, could have denoted not only ›the act of looting from the houses of deported Jews‹, but also the very state of verbal instability itself.

4. *Shabreven* in Postwar Polish Discourse

By debating the morality and etymology of *shabreven,* postwar commentators like Blumental, Kaplan, and Orenstein extended the ghetto discourse on the term. In both wartime and postwar contexts, *shabreven* acted as a stimulus for ethical debate and a conduit for witnessing the material and ethical state of crisis that Jews suffered in the ghetto. Beyond the work of researchers and cultural commentators, the word continued to appear well into the 1970s in Yiddish-language memorial literature, often in little-known publications, written by the survivor community.[55]

In postwar discourse, however, the term also had a prominent place beyond this internal use among Yiddish-speaking survivors. It branched out into two other cultural realms after the war – into Polish, and into Yiddish-language Zionist discourse. As *shabreven* traveled into these new realms, the term underwent different types of uncanny mistranslations, which preserved the basic semantics of the term but also eliminated some significant part of its meaning. The major postwar epilogue for *shabreven* took place in the Polish language. A 1945 article in the Polish worker's party newspaper *Naprzód* (Forward), written by T.W. Jaworski and entitled ›Szaber‹, begins as follows: ›*Szaber* is probably the most popular word in our language today. The word is young, the concept is old or, even worse, deeply rooted in us.‹[56] The author goes on to bemoan the ethical conundrum of Polish society, caught in a frenzy to gather

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55 E.g. Yehudah Elberg, *Afn shpitz fun a mast. Roman [At the Tip of a Mast. A Novel]*, Montreal 1974, pp. 38, 39, 47, 232, 244, 247; Julien Hirshaut, *Der nigun fun nekhtn [Yesterday's Melody]*, Tel Aviv 1978, p. 83.

56 T.W. Jaworski, Szaber, in: *Naprzód [Forward]*, 15 July 1945, p. 4. A clipping of this article appears in Nachman Blumental Archive, YIVO New York, currently uncatalogued. See also Marcin Zaremba, Studies: Szaber frenzy, in: *Holocaust Studies and Materials* 2 (2010), pp. 173-203, which is mostly about the phenomenon of looting, rather than about the term *szaber* itself.

abandoned German property after the war. On the one hand, Jaworski argues that Poles were the victim of German aggression and should thus feel ethically justified in their drive to *szaber*. In his words: ›The Germans robbed our country very thoroughly and systematically. We will not list the details because we all know them very well, often from our own experience. A page of history has been turned and it is now our turn. Now we have an undeniable right to take back what has been taken from us.‹ On the other hand, Jaworski fears the state of lawlessness in which individual citizens take on this project themselves, with no unified, collective plan. As he adds, ›We must not allow ourselves to create a type of sanctioned thief who, for his own benefit, not for the good of the state, goes West [i.e. to the Lower Silesia area] and carries out orgies of robbery.‹[57]

There are several important points to note in Jaworski's use of *szaber* here. First of all, the ghetto-Yiddish definition of the word – as the questionably justified looting of abandoned property – has clearly influenced and changed the meaning of the word in Polish, in which it had previously meant small pebbles, a builder's tool or, more marginally, plain thievery. Additionally, the term feels ›young‹ to the author, signaling that he was not aware of its marginal Polish-language use before the war, in any of its connotations. For both of these reasons, it seems extremely likely that the Jewish ghetto version of *shabreven* was what injected new life into the Polish *szaber*, making it into the iconic term that Jaworski describes at this postwar moment. The footprint of Khurbn Yiddish can be seen on the postwar Polish *szaber* and yet, remarkably, Jews are entirely missing from the article. Ignoring the Yiddish influence on this new and popularized version of *szaber* is not merely an intellectual omission but actually a bold historical and political claim; the author uses the word to tell the story of conquest, murder and theft in WWII in Poland without mentioning the victimhood of Jews. Polish Jewry have not only been physically annihilated en masse; their history has also been erased.

Another Polish-language article about the word *szaber* from this same year, printed in the newspaper *Dziennik Łódzki* (The Lodz Daily), is written in the same spirit. This author is also very explicit in stating that the word dramatizes only the interactions between Germans and Poles: ›True, this is about revenge. True, the Germans themselves robbed and stole ruthlessly and mercilessly.‹[58] This new, postwar Polish version of *szaber* can thus best be described as an uncanny mistranslation of Khurbn Yiddish. On the one hand, it is semantically very close to the ghetto term and even evokes a parallel type of moral debate. But an important part of the word is missing: its referential connection to the eradication of Polish Jewry and the mass looting of Jewish property, the very context that had shaped the term into the icon it had become.

57 Jaworski, Szaber (fn 56).

58 Szaber na pniu [Szaber happening immediately], in: *Dziennik Łódźki [The Lodz Daily]*, 30 July 1945, p. 4. Clipping in Blumental archive.

This mistranslation seems to be more than a matter of ignorance or oversight. In fact, the Polish linguist Henryk Ułaszyn made a concerted effort to study the etymology of *szaber*, publishing his findings on two separate occasions. In one (1951), Ułaszyn presents the term as follows: ›As a result of the disorganization of the occupation and the moral consequences of the war, i.e. the long reign of brute material force – so towards the end of the discussed era, the word *szaber* appeared, meaning theft practiced non-professionally; *Szabrownik* – is an amateur thief of someone else's property.‹[59] While precise in many other ways, Ułaszyn speaks hazily about the ›appearance‹ of the term during the war era, and does not mention Jews or a Yiddish influence.

By contrast, in a different publication (1957), Ułaszyn does bring up Jewry when detailing the word's much earlier history as part of a thieves' jargon in the nineteenth century. He asserts that, during that earlier historical phase, the word had migrated from German to Polish via Yiddish.[60] Ułaszyn cites *szaber* as part of a broader, historical lexicon of thieves' vocabulary that was borrowed from Jewish languages. In the first publication, he had already vaguely acknowledged that the word's usage and popularity changed significantly ›during the German occupation era‹, when it ›entered the general Polish language with the meaning of »to steal or to rob«.‹[61] Ułaszyn maneuvers around the Holocaust: he does not mention that the term morphed and rose in popularity as a result of Jewish victimization, but instead emphasizes Jews only in terms of their part in the Polish underworld.[62] The Jewish *szaber* relates to thuggery, whereas the general Polish *szaber* refers to victim self-defense.

In sum, it seems that in postwar Polish, the word *szaber* contained an eerie and highly meaningful silence. There was some kind of Jewish association attached to the word, some awareness that its renewal and popularity related to the time when Jews were being killed en masse within Polish society. But, in these lengthy public discussions of the term, people seem to have actively avoided this aspect of *szaber*'s development. Instead of discussing the ghettos or the Holocaust, Polish language commentators transferred the word's Jewishness back to the time when Jews were not only living in abundance in Poland, but were part of its underworld – not victims of theft and violence, but its perpetrators, albeit in a form much milder than that of WWII. In the postwar years, the new Polish version of *szaber* became an aid in obfuscating the specific victimization of Jews, painting a picture of mere moral chaos.

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59 Henryk Ułaszyn, *Język złodziejski = La langue des voleurs [The Language of Thieves]*, Łódź 1951, p. 50.

60 Ułaszyn, Wojna i Język (fn 44), p. 38. See also Angelika Adamczyk, Hebrew and Polish: Mutual Influences and Their Contribution in Creating a Polish Criminals' Jargon, in: *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 47 (2018), pp. 424-435.

61 Ułaszyn, *Język złodziejski* (fn 59), p. 50.

62 On an individual level, Ułaszyn himself was actively against anti-Semitism after the war. Mirosław Skarżyński, O prof. Henryku Ułaszynie [About Professor Henryk Ułaszyn], in: *LingVaria* 1 (2006), issue 2, pp. 66-73, here p. 71. That he could create such a historical narrative around *szaber* speaks to its structural predominance in Polish culture.

5. *Shabreven* in Postwar Zionist Discourse

In the case of postwar Polish discourse, the gap in meaning between the ghetto *shabreven* and postwar Polish *szaber* dramatizes the avoidance of Jewish victimhood on Polish soil. This mistranslation thus constitutes an example of an intangible yet powerful act of cultural genocide, emptying Jewish cultural symbols of Jewish experience. In this Polish case, the cultural genocidal act relates directly, and perhaps predictably, to physical genocide, in which many non-Jewish Poles acted either as enablers or collaborators in the destruction of Jewish communities. However, an examination of a type of internally Jewish, Yiddish-to-Yiddish or Yiddish-to-Hebrew postwar translation, or mistranslation, complicates the connection between cultural and physical genocide. This took place when several Yiddish cultural figures from Palestine arrived at the displaced persons camps after the war and turned *shabreven* into a symbol of the degradation they observed there. These figures also elevated the word in a manner that eliminated part of its core meaning from the ghetto, showing how difficult it was to translate Khurbn Yiddish into Zionist discourse.

In 1945, Ya'akov Zerubavel, a leader of the Histadrut Labor Organization and Left Po'alei Tzion (Zionist) movement, came from Palestine to visit the Jews remaining in Poland and to try to persuade them to move to Palestine. As a leftist who had famously advocated for the use of Yiddish in Israel, Zerubavel approached postwar Yiddish culture with a fair amount of sensitivity. He had visited Poland as late as 1939, and was thus able to discern ways this community's culture had changed over the intervening years.[63] He published a series of newspaper articles in both Yiddish and Hebrew about this 1945 visit, which coalesced into the book *Barg Khurbn* (Mountain of Destruction) published just one year later. At its core, this book argues that all Jews should now move to Palestine, even and especially those who had had no previous connection to Zionism. Coming from a leftist-Yiddishist perspective, he depicts postwar survivor culture with empathy, but nonetheless declares Jewish life in Poland *bankrot* (bankrupt) – a term that he uses time and again in the book, and even as the title of a chapter.[64] By cultural ›bankruptcy‹, Zerubavel implied that there had not been an inherent problem with Diaspora communities before the war, as some more mainstream Zionists claimed. Rather, the contingencies of history, i.e. the Holocaust, had depleted that Diasporic culture of all its once valuable resources, had scarred it and left it bereft of meaning.

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63 Art. ›Ya'akov Zerubavel‹, in: David Tidhar (ed.), *Entsiklopedia lehalutsei hayeshuv ubonav [Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel]*, Tel Aviv 1952, pp. 2298-2301; Ella Florsheim, *Tehiat hamilim. Tarbut hayidish bemahanot ha'akurim [The Revival of Words. Yiddish Culture in Displaced Persons Camps]*, Tel Aviv 2020, pp. 255-256.

64 Ya'akov Zerubavel, *Barg Khurbn. Kapitlen Poyln [Mountain of Destruction. Chapters on Poland]*, Buenos Aires 1946, pp. 59, 164.

It is in this spirit that Zerubavel turned to the word *shabreven*, making it an emblem of such cultural ›bankruptcy‹. At one point, he criticizes refugee aid organizations, such as the ›the [American Jewish] Joint [Distribution Committee] and ORT [Organization for Rehabilitation through Training]‹, claiming they were achieving very little for survivors despite their sizable budgets. Without a social support structure, ›People are throwing themselves at easy money; they're slipping down familiar paths… Everyone is trading. Everyone is speculating. Everyone is *shabreven*.‹[65] While pointing a finger at the inept Jewish institutional leaders, Zerubavel also blames ›familiar paths‹ – i.e. degenerate cultural habits – for enabling this downward spiral among survivors. *Shabreven* accentuates the fact that these ›paths‹ came from the Holocaust experience: even after liberation, Jews were still relying on both the habits and the words that they had acquired as Nazi prisoners. To move away from this sullied word and sullied culture, Jews would have to make a fresh start elsewhere.

At another point in the book, Zerubavel amplifies the emotional pitch of this dual accusation. He blames the political party leaders for slowing down refugee emigration from Europe for their own profit. These politicians ›picked up on the fact that they could lick a bone and even earn a good living here [in Poland]. So they speculated with Jewish sorrows and *shabrevet* Jewish longings for home.‹[66] With his metaphoric use of the term, ›looting Jewish longings‹, Zerubavel binds institutional to cultural corruption. He defines the object of this plundering as the spiritual well-being of the Jewish people. Importantly, it is not Yiddish itself that Zerubavel seeks to abandon, but Khurbn Yiddish specifically – the verbal memory of being a victim in a dirty, lowly and morally confusing way. In Zerubavel's rendering, the word loses its sense of constant movement, and its capacity to prompt self-inquiry. It no longer moves like a bouncy ball, to return to Opoczyński's metaphor, between positive and negative connotations, rightful acquisition and theft, lingual corruption and lingual play. In short, the dynamic subjectivity of ghetto Jewish society, hard-won in the face of extreme degradation and archived within *shabreven* – had been eliminated. In translating *shabreven* to the Zionist discourse of 1945 Palestine, Zerubavel turned it into a tool of expressing the moral superiority of Jews in Erets Yisrael over the survivors in Poland.

Zerubavel's voice was prominent in Palestine at this time. In addition to his writing, he spoke on the radio and in public frequently and his visit to Poland was heavily reported in the press.[67] It is thus highly likely that his use of *shabreven* reached many people. He may, for instance, have influenced the leftist Yiddish writer and journalist Mordechai Tsanin,[68] who also shone a spotlight on this very same word as a symbol of

65 Ibid., p. 59.
66 Ibid., p. 164.
67 E.g. Y. Zerubavel beradyo varsha [Y. Zerubavel on Warsaw Radio], in: *Davar*, 6 December 1945, p. 1; Siha im Y. Zerubavel [Conversation with Y. Zerubavel], in: *Davar*, 6 December 1945, p. 4; Al hamiut shesarad [On the Minority that Survived], in: *Davar*, 16 January 1945, p. 1; Moetzet poaley zion besiman hagola [The Poalei Zion in the Sign of the Diaspora], in: *Davar*, 20 January 1946, p. 1.
68 Rachel Rojanski, *Yiddish in Israel. A History*, Bloomington 2020, pp. 52-54.

postwar Polish Jewry: ›The most popular word in Poland right now is *shabreven*. The use of this word is widespread among all sectors of the population in Poland‹,[69] he wrote in the prominent Hebrew-language newspaper *Davar* in 1947. Discussing its putatively Hebraic root, Tsanin tauntingly rejects any sacral residue in the term. ›The word comes from the Hebrew *shavar*. That means to break, to detach from the dynasty of human crimes, of murder, of thievery, and set out on the right path... If you're inclined to think that way, that's a sign that the reality in Poland is completely foreign to you. Indeed the word *shabreven* has a deep meaning, but it is just the opposite: It signifies the lowest point of human descent.‹[70] Strikingly, Tsanin goes on to discuss *shabreven* as a term used only by Poles, ruthlessly looting Jewish goods. He almost entirely omits to mention that Jews used the word to describe their own behavior, except for a marginal comment that the Polish practice had begun to seep into Jewish behavior as well after a while. Though there was certainly widespread Polish use of the term and the practice in postwar years,[71] it seems odd that Tsanin so drastically minimizes the Jewish connection to the term. In a sense, Tsanin's use of *shabreven* presents the inverse of that employed by the Polish journalists discussed above. While Polish writers like Jaworski avoided discussing the Polish participation in violence against Jews as part of the history of *shabreven*, for Tsanin this constituted the word's almost exclusive content.

Reflecting his socialist background, Tsanin also adds a Marxist element to this picture in this same article, describing these Polish *shabrovnikes* as the new ›lumpen-bourgeoisie‹. Antisemitism and class-based corruption, housed within the word *shabreven*, are what make Jewish life in the Diaspora untenable. That is, Tsanin is unwilling to hold Jews in any way responsible for their postwar state of chaos and corruption. In this sense, Tsanin's assessment of the word differed from that of Zerubavel, who turned the word into a platform for Jewish self-recrimination. Nonetheless, for both of these leaders, *shabreven* became a flat rhetorical tool for condemning the refugee diaspora. There was no room for Jewish diasporic agency: either survivors were completely morally lost, or they were the helpless victims of Polish immorality. According to Zerubavel and Tsanin, there was no way for them to be both victims as well as moral agents, the notion of ›and‹ captured in Opoczyński and Bryner's reflections. Transferring Jewish survivors from Poland to Palestine was thus the only way to bring back their moral agency.

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69 Mordechai Tsanin, Al horavot hayahdut bepolin [On the Ruins of Polish Jewry], in: *Davar*, 29 July 1947, p. 2. He also published a version of this article in Yiddish slightly later: Mordechai Tsanin, Me' handelt its mit idish farmegn un ›idish ash‹ in di shtet un sthetlakh fun poylen [We are Dealing now with Jewish Property and ›Jewish Ash‹ in the Cities and Towns of Poland], in: *Forverts*, 16 August 1947, p. 4, and subsequently as part of a book, where the word also appears: Mordechai Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok. A rayze iber hundert khorev-gevorene kehiles in Poyln [Of Stones and Ruins. A Journey Through One Hundred Destroyed Communities in Poland]*, Tel Aviv 1952, pp. 345-346.

70 Tsanin, Al horavot (fn 69).

71 Jonas Turkow, *Nokh der bafrayung [After the Liberation]*, Buenos Aires 1959, p. 232, asserts that Jews were engaging in *shabreven* after the war but that Poles subsequently took over the practice, even pushing Jews off trains to take their goods.

Both Zerubavel and Tsanin mistranslated *shabreven*, draining the word of its potential for self-reflection and moral agency on the part of Holocaust victims. Their comments on the term seem to reflect a structural translation gap that goes beyond the difference between Holocaust survivors and non-survivors. The transition from *shabreven* of the ghetto to *shabreven* of Zionist discourse in Palestine entails translating one version of Jewish community to another, between which there are geographic, lingual, and conceptual differences. It is a translation between peoplehood and statehood, between a vision of Jewishness based on tacit social negotiations and a vision with codified, modern legal boundaries. The dynamic ›and‹ contained within *shabreven*, that which attests to both Jewish victimhood as well as Jewish moral agency, could find little room in the pre-state Zionist discourse of that moment.

6. Conclusion

It is now time to return to the two larger questions that have framed this article – the first regarding the potential motives for preserving Holocaust Yiddish neologisms, rather than correcting the language, and the second regarding Lemkin's notion of lingual erasure as a key aspect of genocidal destruction. This case study of the word *shabreven* makes it clear why postwar Yiddish commentators would want to archive, analyze and disseminate Holocaust Yiddish words. The term, as discussed and employed in the ghetto, most certainly represented an aspect of Jewish moral collapse. But it also signified something else, something positive: the capacity of Jewish victims to self-reflect, to recognize and vocalize their communal crises and to maintain a sense of connection to Jewish cultural memory, via etymological debate. In short, *shabreven* represented both a genocidal collapse of language as well as the victims' efforts to reclaim language. Unlike its postwar usages in Polish and Zionist discourses, the ghetto *shabreven* contained a type of dynamism, a profound sense of ›and‹ that revealed the complex humanity of its tormented speakers.

This humanizing complexity of Holocaust victimhood is precisely what the Khurbn Yiddish lexicographers strove to preserve in their postwar dictionaries and glossaries. They did not seek to eradicate these ghetto and camp neologisms from Yiddish speech, as Klemperer, Sternberger and others did with Nazi German – because these Yiddish words illuminated something valuable about their culture under genocidal conditions. Based on two postwar epilogues of *shabreven*, the Khurbn Yiddish lexicographic intervention seems important indeed. The most prominent postwar appearances of the word, in Polish and in Zionist discourses, did not preserve the complexity or dignity held within *shabreven*. The humanity and dynamism of the word became lost in translation, each time in a different way. Whereas the postwar Polish rendering of *shabreven* erased Jewish victimhood from the word's connotations, the Zionist rendering of the word flattened Jewish victimhood into moral and cultural ›bankruptcy‹.

Thus, by elevating and continuing ghetto discussions around *shabreven*, postwar Khurbn Yiddish lexicographers preserved an important moment of Jewish subjectivity, one that combined deep suffering and verbal agency.

Here we return to the second question, that of language within the framework of Lemkinian genocide. We see from the case study of *shabreven* that Lemkin was justified in tying the destruction of peoplehood – his definition of genocide – to the destruction of language. Documenting, discussing and displaying the impact of the Holocaust on Yiddish was a high priority for many Yiddish cultural leaders. Like Lemkin, people such as Opoczyński, Blumental, Kaplan, and Orenstein analyzed language in order to understand what Hitler had done to their people. But in looking at the concrete example of this specific term, we may also see ways in which Lemkin's ideas about language and genocide may be refined. For one, genocidal conditions certainly did lead to the corruption and destruction of the victims' language. Even so, that victim group was able, in certain ways and in certain moments, to turn the tide of this lingual destruction and find means of creative and agentive lingual response, even as the genocide was unfolding. Secondly, it is too simplistic to think of linguicide as the mere cessation of language use, a forced erasure of that language. Words drawn from the victim experience can be appropriated by other languages or cultures in ways that keep those terms alive and yet are dehumanizing vis-à-vis the victim culture. The popularity of the ghetto term *shabreven* in postwar Polish was not a matter of Jewish lingual survival, but instead aided the denial of Jewish suffering in Poland. Moreover, the misappropriation and emptying of victim language can even occur within the very ethnic group that had undergone persecution – as was the case with the translation of *shabreven* into Zionist discourse. Collective migration and resettlement can also lead to the voiding of a previous language system, exacerbating the effects of genocide on language. In other words, genocide may not only lead to the erasure of a certain language, but also, simply put, to bad translations of it.

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