

Roman Jakobson's Research into Judeo-Czech

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Abstract: The genius of Roman Jakobson strongly also influenced the scholarship dealing with the earliest evidence of Old Czech. Dating back to Jakobson's youth and reaching its summit in the early 1940s, the topic of Judeo-Czech, i.e., Old Czech written in Hebrew script in the form of the so-called Canaanite glosses, had been emerging in Jakobson's publications for decades. It reappeared again at the end of his life. This contribution traces the history of Jakobson's interest in Judeo-Czech (or Old Czech) glosses written in Hebrew script. In addition to extant publications, it makes use of unpublished materials from the Roman Jakobson Papers, kept at MIT, Cambridge, MA. It further presents the overview of Jakobson's work in the field, published and unpublished, and compares selected points from Jakobson's research with the current state of scholarship.

Keywords: Judeo-Czech; Canaanite glosses; Old Czech

Roman Jakobson, the *ruskij filolog* (Birnbaum 1998, 85) and universal *intellectual giant* (Rosenblith 1983, 85) had also a strong influence on scholarship dealing with the earliest evidence of Primitive and Old Czech.¹ The topic of the language of Czech Jews before 1300, as recorded especially in the form of the so-called Canaanite glosses in Hebrew script, had been appearing in Jakobson's publications for decades, virtually until the end of his life. Most of these glosses are attested to in two masterpieces of the first half of the 13th century, namely *Or Zarua* completed in 1246 and *Arugat ha-Bosem* completed in about 1234. Jakobson's Jewishness and his interest in early stages of Slavonic languages were united in this field of research as his long-time pursuit of the topic was further encouraged by close personal friendships with eminent scholars like Max Weinreich and Morris Halle. Studying the language of Czech Jews provided him with parallels to trends or constructs he defined with respect to other topics. His effort to present the Czech lands as neither East nor West found a noteworthy parallel and support in the bipolar Eastern-Western origins of Czech Jews while the expansion of Czech into Old Polish in the Christian milieu resembled the Czech influence on Polish Jews during the Middle Ages.

In this paper I will attempt to trace the history of Jakobson's interest in the language of medieval Czech Jews as it is reflected in glosses written in Hebrew script,² present the overview of his published and unpublished works in this field, and compare selected points in his research with the current state of scholarship.

Tracing the history of Jakobson's interest

The topic first caught Jakobson's attention when he was nineteen years old. He later acknowledges this in his correspondence and unpublished manuscripts and there is additional evidence confirming this early interest of his. In a manuscript stored in Roman Jakobson Papers at the MIT, he himself writes: "Славянские глоссы в др.-евр. памятниках привлекли мое внимание уже в 1915 г."³ (Slavic glosses in Old Hebrew literature caught my attention as early as 1915.) He also discloses

¹ The contribution originated as a part of and thanks to the support of the project of the Czech Science Foundation No. P406/11/0861 *Kenaanské glosy ve středověkých hebrejských rukopisech s vazbou na české země*.

² Cf. also Dittmann (2012), Bláha et al. (2014a, 2014b). This study presents a modified and completed version of the studies mentioned.

³ Roman Jakobson Papers, MC 72, Institute Archives and Special Collections, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA (hereafter, RJP, box number / folder number), box 16, folder 68. A translation of this statement appears also in RJP 13/58: "Slaviše glosn in hebryjiše gšribane denkmaln hobn mix farinteresirt šyn in 1915..." (Slavic glosses in documents written in Hebrew have interested me since 1915.) The author would like to thank Prof. L. R. Waugh, the Executive Director of Roman Jakobson Intellectual Trust, for permission to publish materials from the RJP.

his long-term interest in this topic in his postwar correspondence with his Czech friends Antonín Stanislav Mágr⁴ and Jindřich Chaloupecký.⁵ A newspaper report on Jakobson's New York lecture of October 1941 quotes Jakobson recalling his Brno colleague, the historian Dr. Vladimír Groh. About the topic of language among Czech Jews during the Middle Ages, Jakobson said: "Chtěl jsem už dávno ... napsat o tom dílo, a slíbil jsem profesoru Grohovi, který se o to nasmírně zajímal, že mu je ukáži v rukopise."⁶ (I intended some time ago ... to write a book about it and I promised prof. Groh, who was extremely interested in it, to show him the manuscript.) Finally, Jakobson's own handwriting in his early excerpts of Slavic glosses offers further objective evidence. The excerpts, deposited in his papers at MIT (RJP 29/61), are written with ink and in handwriting quite similar to his early poems (cf. RJP 31/21). At the time, he excerpted several Slavic glosses, including their Hebrew context (in a Russian transcription), and numbered them. The glosses include those contained in the *Arugat ha-Bosem* (e.g., *potemněla, temná, osvietiti s'a, po mém obznamenání s'a* etc.) and glosses of the Munich Codex No. 346, namely *stegna, rataj* and *žagavicě*. The sources for the excerpts were two articles of 1877 and 1886, respectively. Obvious is also his uncertainty how to interpret some glosses, e.g., in the case of a most probably corrupted pair of neighboring glosses from the *Arugat ha-Bosem* he notes "prišno - prisk'ci (?)" (RJP 29/61).

Jakobson's first brief mention of the Jewish-Czech language in Přemyslid Bohemia appeared in 1923 in his Russian book on Czech verse *О чешском стихе: преимущественно в сопоставлении с русским* published in Germany and in 1936 in his published polemics against a Nazi-inclined historian Konrad Bittner. One year later, he mentions for the first time that the oldest Czech sentence occurs not in the Leitmeritz Chapter Foundation Charter, but in Joseph Kara's writings predating the Leitmeritz record by a century. In 1938, the ongoing polemics against Bittner forced Jakobson to elaborate on medieval Prague Jewish literature. He describes in more detail the Old Czech glosses and compares the number of French and German glosses in the *Or Zarua* and *Arugat ha-Bosem*. In the late 1930s the topic of Old Czech glosses became allegedly the central research subject for Jakobson (cf. Rudy 1985, xvi). There are extensive excerpts among his unpublished papers (e.g., RJP 29/61–76, 30/1–9) dating most probably from this time. After his arrival in the USA, he had already all the necessary excerpts and thoughts well prepared.

⁴ A letter of 1948, RJP 44/7: "Zabýval jsem se těmito věcmi a sbíral materiál od svých studentských let." (I have been occupying myself with these things and collected material since my student days.)

⁵ A letter of 2nd April 1947, RJP 40/32: "[p]roblém, pro který jsem sbíral materiál od dob studentských..." (a problem on which I have been collecting materials since my student days...).

⁶ Undated newspaper clip of 1941 on Jakobson's New York lecture, see RJP 38/46.

Jakobson's research in this field reached its peak in New York in the first half of the 1940s. On October 2, 1941 he lectured in New York's Public Library (RJP 38/46) on the topic *Zapomenuté památky k poznání Přemyslovské Prahy* (Forgotten documents shed light on Přemyslid Prague) and spoke extensively on Prague Jews of the 13th century.⁷ His first published article in the US appeared on December 5th 1941—quite uncharacteristically in the *American Hebrew*, intermingled with advertisements—about half a year after his arrival. His article was wholly devoted to this topic. In fact, all the central topics of his research into the Czech of Jews in the Middle Ages are summarized in this short article including the Eastern origin of Czech Jewry, the Czech Jewish tradition in Přemyslid Prague, the oldest Czech sentence, and the value of and differences between Old Czech glosses in *Or Zarua* and *Arugat ha-Bosem* etc. During his sojourn in Scandinavia, he had already discovered medieval documents voicing admiration for the Czech lands by Jewish merchants (Jakobson 1995, 18). He also found a supportive environment for the continuation of these studies in the collaboration with the Norwegian semitist H. Birkeland and, after relocating to New York, especially thanks to Max Weinreich and others at YIVO and, later, in Morris Halle. We can document his research in this field in the first half of the 1940s by following the many traces he left behind. Between 1941 and 1944, Jakobson gave at least 4 lectures in which he focused on the topic (see below) while the drafts of all the articles published later originated between 1942 and 1944, as indicated by the end notes in his *Selected Writings*. 1943 saw the publication of his highly controversial *Moudrost starých Čechů*, which also briefly mentions the speech of Czech Jews in the Middle Ages.

An almost completed, lengthy Russian monograph devoted to this topic originated in the period of the late 1930s and most probably in the first half of the 1940s. It is partially preserved as a RJP manuscript. His postwar correspondence with B. Havránek, A. S. Mágr, H. Volavková, U. Weinreich, M. Weinreich, N. P. Savickij, and K. Wehle confirms that he had almost finished the manuscript and prepared it for print (see Dittmann, 2012, 273–274 for details). The title underwent slight changes in the course of time: *Bohemica v hebrejských textech XI.–XIII. stol.* (Bohemica in Hebrew texts of the 11th–13th centuries), *Bohemica v hebrejských rukopisech 11.–13. století* (Bohemica in Hebrew manuscripts of the 11th–13th centuries), *Bohemica v hebrejském písemnictví 11.–13. století* (Bohemica in Hebrew literature of the 11th–13th centuries), *Čeština v židovských památkách 11.–13. st.* (Czech in Jewish documents of the 11th–13th centuries) etc., (cf. Bláha et al., 2014b, 284).

Wisely, after WWII, Jakobson did not return to Czechoslovakia. In the late 1940s he sent to the Czechoslovak publishing house Sfinx a study on the speech and

⁷ As a lecture summary published in the *New-Yorské Listy* in October 1941 (see RJP 38/46) reports it.

literature of the Czech Jews under the Přemyslid rule but the publication was not realized because of the postwar lack of paper. Most probably, it finally appeared in 1957 (Jakobson 1957). Even in the 1950s, Jakobson listed a completion of his monograph on Judeo-Czech among his current research projects. This intention of his is further supported by the correspondence with M. Weinreich. In 1957, Jakobson lectured in Czechoslovakia on the language of medieval Czech Jews but the lecture could only be published abroad. In 1964, he issued (in collaboration with M. Halle) his longest and most famous study on the topic called *The Term Canaan in Medieval Hebrew*. In that study Jakobson used a large part of the manuscript monograph, nearly completed in New York in the early 1940s, in addition to some upgrading additions (e.g., a critique of Kupfer and Lewicki's Polish monograph of 1956 at the end, the completion of footnotes, etc.). Once again, he announced his plan to publish a monograph on the topic. He completed his last contribution to this field when he was over eighty, once again resuming the draft outlined in 1942–44.

Overview of Jakobson's works in the field of Judeo-Czech

Printed works dealing wholly with the topic were published in 1941 (Jakobson 1941), 1957 (Jakobson 1957), 1964 (Jakobson and Halle 1964) and 1985 (Jakobson 1985). Apart from these major works, scattered mentions appear in other Jakobson's writings, e.g., in *Moudrost starých Čechů* (The Wisdom of Ancient Czechs).

Jakobson's lectures that were not published include *Zapomenuté památky k poznání Přemyslovské Prahy* (Československý kulturní kroužek, New York, 2nd October 1941, cf. RJP 38/46), *Čeští středověcí židé a jejich jazyk* (New York, École Libre des Hautes Études, 1943), *Slovanské prvky v jazyce židovském* (ibidem, 1944.) The latter is possibly the basis for his later study *The Yiddish Sound Pattern and Its Slavic Environment* published in 1953.⁸ Finally, *Řeč a písemnictví českých Židů v době přemyslovské* (Prague, Czechoslovakia, 1957). We do not know how much of this lecture was actually published in Jakobson 1957.

Following is a survey of the unpublished yet preserved writings.

RJP 16/68 the main part entitled Язык и правописание ханаанских глос и имен в др.-еврейской средневековой письменности (Language and orthography of the Canaanite glosses and names in Old Hebrew medieval writings)—92 handwritten pages (written by Jakobson's hand) on the language

⁸ In his report on scholarly activities of 1939–1945 (RJP 1/16), Jakobson states that he has written an article for the *Journal of the Yiddish Scientific Institute* dealing with the Slavic impact on Yiddish phonology.

and orthography of Canaanic glosses, about 35 normalized pp. Published by the present author and colleagues in *Jews & Slavs* 24 (2014).

RJP 13/59 (*Šprax un ujslyjg fun כנען-iše glosn un nemen in hebryjšen mitlalterlaxer literatur* /Speech and orthography of Canaanite glosses and names in Hebrew medieval literature/)—a 23-page-long Yiddish manuscript, partial but not identical translation of RJP 16/68, not in Jakobson's handwriting.

RJP 13/60—a 9-page typed Yiddish manuscript (untitled, starting with an excuse “*Cum erstn mol in lebn lejen jich a referat in jideš...*” /for the first time in my life I am giving a paper in Yiddish.../ in Jakobson's handwriting). Very probably a lecture *Čeština pražských židů v XI–XIII stol.* (Presented at the Yiddish Scientific Institute, New York, 1942), cf. RJP 13/54.

RJP 13/54—an untitled 13-page-long Russian manuscript written by Jakobson, a Yiddish translation of this manuscript is in RJP 13/60. The lecture was definitely intended for an American audience as it draws e.g., a parallel between multilingual milieu of medieval Jews and multilevel stylistic diversification of English.

RJP 13/55—a 20-page-long manuscript in Russian, the basis of Jakobson's article in *American Hebrew* (the manuscript starts with an English title *Cultural Prosperity of Czech Jews in Middle Ages*).

RJP 34/44 *The Languages of the Diaspora as a Particular Linguistic Problem* (transcript of a lecture delivered on 7th April 1958, Columbia University, New York), cf. the annual report in RJP 1/28.

There are also plenty of background materials, for example secondary literature excerpts, lists, outlines, a glossary of excerpted Canaanite glosses, correspondence, etc.

Comparison of selected points with the current state of scholarship

Jakobson's excellent insight into the problem of Canaanite glosses, i.e. Slavic, especially Czech medieval word in Hebrew script, requires only minor corrections and additions today. Let us name but a few:

It is essential that the original manuscripts be consulted for the exact readings rather than extant published editions, which frequently corrupt the Slavic gloss. Surprisingly, even modern critical editions, when available, are frequently misleading. Some differences appear between published editions and the original manuscripts, as for example missing vocalization in the edition, e.g., בילמו *bělmo* (*Or Zarua*, manuscript, London, British Library, Or. 2859, fol. 184a)—*Or Zarua*, edition of 1888, p. 71 ביילמו *blažen* (manuscript with Kara's commentary, St. Petersburg, Russian National Library, Evr. I 21, fol. 60b)—edition Harkavy

(1867, p. 50) בלאזין *kraboška* (manuscript *Or Zarua*: Amsterdam, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Rosenthal 3, II, fol. 57b)—*Or Zarua*, edition of 1862, p. 42 קרבושקא; קרוג *krug* (manuscript in St. Petersburg, Russian National Library, Evr. I 11, fol. 155a, a marginal gloss)—edition Harkavy (1867, 64f.) קרויטני *květný* (*Or Zarua*, manuscript, Amsterdam, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Rosenthal 3, II, fol. 25a)—*Or Zarua*, edition of 1862, p. 18: קויטני.

Newly found “glosses” (or *bohémica*) have to be added to the corpus, e.g. סמוסטרל (*samostriel/samoštriel*),⁹ הטןוארוג (*ha-tvarog*; Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, Cod. Parm. 2413, fol. 1a), פלכטיצא (*plachtica*; New York, Jewish Theological Library, Lutzky 778, fol. 42b), חבושתישצו [*chvoštišce*; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 301, fol. 134a), קוטקוי (*kotvy*; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 301, fol. 138b), פשו (*pažú*; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 301, fol. 175a) etc. Furthermore, newly found facts as for example the likely first mentions of the influence of Slavic pronunciation compared to the Ashkenazic and Tsarfatic (possibly from the second half of the 13th c.) in the work of Jequiel ha-Kohen ben Jehuda, need to be added to the contributions of medieval Jews to Slavic and Czech studies.

Jakobson's extrapolation that all Canaanite glosses are Old Czech may be revised in a few individual cases (cf. Kulik 2012, 399–400) while some further exceptions to his otherwise correct generalizations can also be adduced. Jakobson (1985, 857) argues that the sound *s* is in Judeo-Czech glosses invariably represented by the grapheme ס, but this does not hold true for the gloss מוניקסטש (*monisto-s*), cf. Dittmann (2012, 279).

The parallel corpus of Czech appellatives prior to 1300 written in the Latin script has to be significantly enlarged (e.g., with newly issued volumes of *Codex diplomaticus et epistolaris regni Bohemiae*), new analyses for word formation productivity, phonology of Old Czech etc., have to be considered, and new theories like that of P. Wexler have to be tested. On the other hand, the recent scholarship also requires some corrections, e.g., the gloss אושג (*ošeg*, *Or Zarua* manuscript: Amsterdam, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Rosenthal 3, II, fol. 214a) for which Shapira (2007, 149) excludes West-Slavonic provenance, fits Old Czech perfectly and is, moreover, introduced by the typical phrase *in the language of Canaan*.

⁹ We would like to thank Prof. Dr. E. Hollender of Frankfurt a. M. University for sharing with us the information regarding this gloss.

Conclusion

Even though a final appreciation of Jakobson's fruitful, long-term interest in Judeo-Czech may be achieved only after the publication and critical assessment of his manuscript materials, most of his known conclusions continue to be generally valid. Nevertheless, some corrections, additions and new contextualizations would certainly have to be made while the lively discussions of problems, such as the Old Czech layer in and influence on Yiddish, would also have to be taken into account. Even though Jakobson's close friend M. Weinreich in his history of Yiddish fundamentally disagreed with Jakobson's conclusions (cf. Bláha et al., 2014b, 318) concerning the Canaanite language—for Weinreich the *Knaanic language* is a language combining only various West Slavonic features—recent scholarship is in line with Jakobson, considering it is basically Old Czech, cf. Uličná 2011. The value of the Primitive/Old Czech “glosses” for diachronic Czech studies is immense. They contribute to the knowledge of Czech phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicology, to phonetics and grammatography, they include possibly the oldest Czech complex sentence, evidence of multilingual environment (equivalents in Slavic, French and German) and feature some archaic phonological traits due to the stability of the writing system or possibly greater conservatism of the Jewish population. It is to Jakobson's merit that he based this research on truly scholarly foundations as far as the linguistic interpretation of the data is concerned. His generalizing genius formulated apt overall tendencies and outlined tasks of research valid even today.

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