Roman Jakobson's Research into Judeo-Czech

Abstract: The genius of Roman Jakobson strongly also influenced the scholarship.

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Points from Jakobson's research with the current state of scholarship.
Jakobson P.A.s, K.P. at M.I.T., Cambridge, MA. Further presents the overview.
In addition to external publications, he makes use of unpublished materials from the Roman
in Judeo-Czech (or Old Czech). Glosses written in Hebrew script in addition
at the end of his life. This contribution traces the history of Jakobson's interest
had been concentrated in Jakobson's publications for decades. It reappeared again
Czech written in Hebrew script in the form of so-called Canaanite glosses.
and reaching its summit in the early 1940s, the topic of Judeo-Czech, &c. Old
and dealing with the earliest evidence of Old Czech. Diving back to Jakobsons youth

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Roman Jakobson, 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. 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 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; 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 гласы в лат.-евр. памятниках привлекли мое внимание уже в 1915 г.”2 (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 project of the Czech Science Foundation No. P406/11/861 Keneaanské glosy ve slovděvských hebrejských rukopisech s vazbou na české čemž.

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, gárulóra denkmal hóbin mi retől? (in 1915…)(Slavic glosses in documents written Executive Director of Roman Jakobson Intellectual Trust, for permission to publish materials

his long-term interest in this topic in his postwar correspondence with his Czech friends Antonín Stanislav Máger3 and Jindřich Chalupecký. A newspaper report on Jakobson’s New York lecture of October 1941 quotes Jakobson recalling his Brno colleague, the historian Dr. Vladimir Groh. About the topic of language among Czech Jews during the Middle Ages, Jakobson said: “Chtěl jsem už dávno… napsat o tom dilo, a slibil jsem profesoru Gröhove, ktery se o to nesmírně zajímal, že mu je ukázat v rukopise.”4 (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., potemel, temmut, osviestit sár, po mém obzněnání sá etc.) and glosses of the Munich Codex No. 346, namely stegna, rataj and žagavie. The sources for the excerpts were two articles of 1877 and 1886, respectively. Obviously 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 “prihno – prškći?”5 (RJP 29/61).

Jakobson’s first brief mention of the Jewish–Czech language in Premyslid 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 Kara’s writings predating the Leitmeritz record by a century. In 1938, the ongoing

4 A letter of 1948, RJP 44/7; “Zabyvil jsem se těmito věcemi 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]roběm, pro který jsem sbíral materiál od dob studentských… (a problem on which I have been collecting materials since my student days…).”
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 Přemyslově Prah” (Forgotten documents shed light on Přemyslid Prague) and spoke extensively on Prague Jews of the 13th century. 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 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. Mahr, 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: Bohemia i v hebrejských textech v hebrejských rukopisech 11th-13th centuries, Bohemia i v hebrejských rukopisech 11th-13th centuries, Bohemia i v hebrejském písemnictví (Italian, 11th-13th centuries). Bohemia i v hebrejském písemnictví (Italian, 11th-13th centuries), Čeština v Židovských památkách (Italian, 11th-13th centuries), Čeština v Židovských památkách (Italian, 11th-13th centuries), etc., (cf. Bláha et al., 2014, 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 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 this 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 his manuscript monograph, nearly completed in New York in the early 1940s, in addition to some upgrading additions (e.g., a critique of Kuper and Lewicki’s Polish monograph of 1926 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 Přemyslově Prah (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. Finally, Účet 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 16/48 the main part entitled Язык и правописание ханаанских гласных 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 and

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

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2. In his report on scholarly activities of 1939–1945 (RJP 1/10), 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 Canaanite glosses, about 35 normalized pp. Published by the present author and colleagues in *Jews & Slavs* 24 (2014).

RJP 13/59 — *Sprach un uhlyi. fun n-nim fn hebreysn mitlallerixce 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 “Com eina ma la in lebn lejen jich a referat in jidisher...” /for the first time in my life I am giving a paper in Yiddish.../ in Jakobson’s handwriting). Very probably a lecture Čeština pražských čidů 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 Jacobson’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 missing from published manuscripts, as for example missing vocalization in the edition, e.g., בֶּלְמָנו belėmno (Or Zarua, manuscript, London, British Library, Or. 2859, fo. 184a)—Or Zarua, edition of 1888, p. 71 Bel'mino, יְלֹמָנו bel'mino (manuscript with Kara’s commentary, St. Petersburg, Russian National Library, Evr. I 21, fol. 60b)—edition Harkavy.

\[\text{kraboška} \text{ (manuscript Or Zarua: Amsterdam, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Rosenthal 3, II, fol. 57b)—Or Zarua, edition of 1862, p. 42} \text{ kříž} \text{ (manuscript in St. Petersburg, Russian National Library, Evr. I 11, fol. 155a, a marginal gloss)—edition Harkavy (1867, 64f.) Kříž} \text{ (manuscript Or Zarua, manuscript, Amsterdam, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Rosenthal 3, II, fol. 25a)—Or Zarua, edition of 1862, p. 18}.

Newly found "glosses" (or bohemicas) have to be added to the corpus, e.g., *samostruč* (samostriel/samostriel), *ha-tvarot* (ha-tvarot; Parma, Biblioteca Paletina, Cod. Parm. 2413, fo. 1a), *plachtična* (plachtica; New York, Jewish Theological Library, Lutsky 778, fo. 42b), *křím* (křím; vaticany; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 301, fol. 134a), *kotvy* (kotvy; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 301, fol. 138b), *pažuč* (pažuč; 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 Ashkenazi and Tsartafic (possibly from the second half of the 13th c.) in the work of Jequiti 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 added. Jakobson (1985, 857) argues that the sound s is in Judoce–Czech glosses invariably represented by the grapheme š, but this does not hold true for the gloss *štěrhaš* (štěrhaš, monista 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 epitolaris regni Bohemiae*), new analyses for word formation productivity, phonology of Old Czech etc., have to be considered, and new theories possibly like that of P. Wexler have to be tested. On the other hand, the recent theories like that of P. Wexler have to be tested. On the other hand, the recent theories like that of P. Wexler have to be tested.

\[\text{We would like to thank Prof. Dr. E. Hollender of Frankfurt a. M. University for sharing with us the information regarding this gloss.}\]
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 Kananitic language is a language combining only various West Slavonic features—recent scholarship is in line with Jakobson, considering it is basically Old Czech, cf. Ulicná 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 grammaticography, 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 conservativism 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.

Works Cited

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