

VECU Project, part „Proverbs“.

6. Specific status of Jewish proverbs. Comparison with German and Polish proverbs

1) Introduction

Where did our proverbs come from?

In my home we used to apply proverbs and epigrams, which were very useful in the education process. And later, when I myself was mother, I used to apply proverbs like: „Do as you would be done by...“, „A lie has no legs“, „A dress adorns...“, „If you are not obedient to the parents, you will be punished“, „Practice makes perfect“.... The proverb accompanied my grandfathers, parents, me, my children and now my grandsons.

After the death of my father at the advanced age of almost 96 I found in his documents up-to date memoirs and also a note with more than 100 proverbs, all written by my father by hand. It was an inspiration for me to prepare it for EFOS, because the topic **Proverbs** had been proposed to be included within the project VECU.

In Slovakia and Austria we found seniors, who were also interested in the topic. The international meetings of seniors in July 2009, in October 2009 and in January 2010 were helpful to answer the existing questions and to compare the output of our work. My task was the comparison between German, Polish and Jewish proverbs.

The analysis based on the comparative tables allowed to state, that almost 80 % of German proverbs have a Polish equivalent or they have the same meaning expressed in another way (chapter 7.1.4). The Jewish proverbs (spread rather in western Europe) very often have equivalents in the German language, whereas in Yiddish there are more proverbs similar to the Polish. Therefore it seems that a significant percentage of Jews speaking Yiddish lived in Polish areas.

2) The cultural background of Yiddish language.

The history of Jewish literature is very complicated and it starts about 3 000 B.C. The most important texts for the Jewish people was the Pentateuch of Moses. In the following centuries comments were added, and new comments for the comments as well. The written Pentateuch consisting of 5 books of Moses represents the oldest part of the Hebrew Bible.

In Christianity it is part of The Old (the First) Testament. The Jewish tradition makes the difference between the written and the oral Pentateuch. The oral comments the written one and fits its unchangeable contents to the changing circumstances. It contains the later comments and interpretations of the Pentateuch.

Many centuries it was not allowed to write down the oral Pentateuch, but in the beginning of III. Century P.C. the **Mishnah** was created; it included the interpretations of the Writings, lectures and instructions of wise men

in 63 **Tractates**. Further generations used to comment the Mishnah in the Academies in Babylon and Palestine, which was the origin of the **Gemara** as an extension and a supplement to the Mishnah. From those two collections Mishnah and Gemara the **Talmud** had been developed, in the 4th century A.C. in Palestine, and in the 6th in Babylon.

After destruction of the 2nd temple by the Romans in the year of 70 A.C. most of the Jewish people lived in exile many centuries. It was the reason that the Jews had been divided into Ashkenazim and Sephardim. The first group lived at first in German countries, and later the name was used for all Jews in Middle and Eastern Europe. The second group, which lived in Spain up to the exile, settled down in Balkan countries, North Africa, Ottoman Empire and in few west European countries. Both groups were strongly influenced by the surrounding people but they also influenced them.

3) Yiddish

Yiddish, the language of the Ashkenazim, is beside the Hebrew one of the main Jewish languages, it is the mostly used in the actual state Israel. It developed in the 10th century as the language of Jews, who settled down in the region between Alsace and Kiel on the river Rhine, and later in Middle and Eastern Europe. Yiddish is a synthesis of German dialects (as a main component), Hebrew-Aramaic and eastern Slavonic.

We call Jewish Middle-European proverbs those, which developed and were influenced in western European countries; they were told in a German coloured by a jargon with expressions in Yiddish. (10)

In the present elaboration we haven't analyzed the Sephardic proverbs but the Yiddish, because these were in more interchange with the European culture and it was easier to get resources..

4) The social environment of the Jewish proverbs

The preservation of their own identity and the hostility of the surrounding people were the reason, that very often Jews lived isolated, even up to building ghettos and „Stetln”(districts in towns). Especially in the East the poverty and begging were common. The rich were encouraged by the Bible to support the poor. Moreover there were frequent pogroms, so very often the life of Jews was really miserable and poor. This influenced the proverbs and their social function. The proverbs comfort the people and are not used primarily for pedagogical support as usually in Europe.

In Poland - in the 18th century - started a movement of religious life renovation named Hasidism. It was rich in literature, short stories and rabbi's aphorisms.

In the Jewish proverbs attention is paid for the Holy Writings, but for humor and irony as well.

Another characteristic was the wide spread unemployment and leisure. It favoured oral culture and striving for education. It could be the reason for the astuteness and wisdom, which are significant for the Yiddish proverbs.

Sometimes visible evident self-criticism instead of praise might have biblical reasons, not in lack of self-confidence, which is many times falsely supposed.

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