



# GRACCHUS'S BOAT: EMIGRATION, TRADITION, AND TRANSLINGUALISM IN THE WORK OF TUVIA RÜBNER

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## Introduction

Immigration radicalizes the question of language. The urge to adopt the language of the new land, at times under conditions of a state of emergency, threatens the ability to retain the language of the homeland. In the case of writers, for whom language serves as a major tool of expression, this urge becomes even more crucial. Emigration to Israel is not exceptional. From the Zionist aliyot at the end of the 19th century to the massive emigrations during the second half of the 20th century from North Africa, Russia and the Former Soviet Union, and up to the current emigration from France, Jewish writers who immigrated to Israel have had to confront the question of language. What choices are open to them, and how are they to convey the complexities inherent in the formation of an Israeli identity? Should they replace the diasporic languages with Hebrew? Should they continue expressing themselves in their mother tongue and publish their work in translation? Or should they perhaps use both languages in their writing, which opens the way for translanguaging?

One of these writers was Tuvia Rübner (1924–2019). Born as Kurt Tobias Rübner into a German-speaking Jewish family in Slovakia, he emigrated from Europe in 1941 at the age of 17. On arrival in Palestine, he kept his German family name (Rübner), but for his given name he preferred the Hebrew (Tuvia) to the German (Tobias). This entwining of German and Hebrew in the name becomes an integral part of Rübner's poetics. He wrote his first poems in German. In 1957 he published his first poetry collection written in Hebrew. In the 1990s Rübner started to translate his own Hebrew

poems into German and published them with Rimbaud Verlag.<sup>1</sup> His writing in German included his autobiography published in 2004 (which two years later he translated into Hebrew) and a series of fragments published in 2018 in the journal *Zwischenwelt: Zeitschrift für Kultur des Exils und Widerstands*.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Rübner translated the German works of Ludwig Strauss, Christoph Meckel and Werner Kraft into Hebrew, and the Hebrew works of Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the Israeli Nobel Prize laureate, into German. He also edited a series of Hebrew translations of German canonical writers, such as Friedrich Schiller, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Friedrich and Wilhelm Schlegel. Despite this massive engagement with German linguistic and aesthetic traditions, Rübner was known more as a Hebrew writer until his death in July 2019. Three years earlier in the introduction to his German translation of his Hebrew poems, Rübner asks: “Am I a Hebrew or a German poet?”<sup>3</sup> What could have been a rhetorical question obtains a surprising answer, which I intend to examine in this article. Moreover, in a recent conference held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on Rübner’s work, some scholars claimed that one can hardly speak of translation in Rübner’s case.<sup>4</sup> In their view, Rübner does not translate his Hebrew poems into German, but writes two different poems — one in Hebrew, the other in German. It seems to me, however, that by separating the Hebrew from the German, one ignores a crucial aspect of Rübner’s poetics. Instead of separating one from the other I would like to explore their meeting points, intersections and mutual relationships.

Jan Hokenson and Marcella Munson defined the bilingual text as a self-translation authored by a writer who can compose in different languages and who translates his or her texts from one language into another: “Bilingual self-translators produce two texts, often publish them under the same title, and usually consider them to be comparable versions.”<sup>5</sup> In referring to how both translation and literary theorists deal unsatisfactorily with this phenomenon they claim: “To date most critics ably describe the dissimilarities between the two versions of a bilingual text, and they end up with an accurate list of details without (as most admit) really illuminating the phenomenon of duality.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the binary theoretical models of “gaps” between texts, languages and cultures, Hokenson and Munson suggest examining the textual intersections and overlaps of versions. They conclude that “once one overlaps the monolingual horizon and can read stereoscopically, the similarities signify as instantiations of a singular poetics in dual discourse.”<sup>7</sup> While focusing on what Hokenson and Munson defined as an intercultural “mid-zone of overlaps and intersections,” I would like to take their criticism of the monolingual binary a step further.

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, because the German name Rübner (ריבנר) is difficult for native Hebrew speakers to pronounce, it was changed into Rivner (ריבנר), which appeared in the Hebrew poetry collections published since the 1950s. In more recent years, however, also because the German collections were published by Rimbaud Verlag, the name ריבנר instead of ריבנר is inscribed on the Hebrew collections.

<sup>2</sup> For the German see Tuvia Rübner, *Ein langes kurzes Leben: Von Preßburg nach Merchavia* (Aachen: Rimbaud Verlag, 2004); for the Hebrew see Tuvia Rübner, *Khayyim arukim ktzarim* (Tel Aviv: Keshev Leshira, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Im halben Licht. Gedichte* (Aachen: Rimbaud Verlag, 2016), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Belated Beauty: In Memory of Tuvia Rübner*, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, January 23, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson, *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2007), 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

In discussing the linguistic paradigms of modern Jewish literature based on various theories of translation,<sup>8</sup> Naomi Brenner emphasizes the role of self-translation: “In Hebrew and Yiddish literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, the individual writer was most commonly the locus of translation, writing and then rewriting his or her texts in Hebrew and Yiddish in some order. The prevalence of self-translation challenges fundamental assumptions about the translator as a mediator and the translated text as being transported across cultural boundaries.”<sup>9</sup> Brenner adopts the term of translanguaging as an alternative to the binary oppositions of bilingualism to “emphasize the movement across languages, [...] the movement of people, ideas and institutions across linguistic boundaries.”<sup>10</sup> According to her, rather than the transpositions of a text into a different culture, translanguaging writers provided intercultural literary-linguistic exercises with aesthetic and ideological implications that challenge the boundaries of hegemonic national culture.

Emily Apter, for her part, critically addresses another binary relationship by exploring translation issues around the beginning of the 21st century. In challenging existing practices of translation based on similarity, she claims the need to “recognize the importance of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability.”<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, she suggests that one “understand the Untranslatable not as a pure difference in opposition to the always translatable (rightly suspect as just another non-coeval form of the romantic Absolute, or fetish of the Other, or myth of hermeneutic inaccessibility), but as a linguistic form of creative failure with homeopathic uses.”<sup>12</sup>

Following these theoretical approaches, this paper intends to explore the relationship between German and Hebrew language traditions in light of Tuvia Rübner’s emigration from Slovakia during the first years of the Second World War. As a consequence of his immigration to Israel and the loss of his family in the Holocaust in 1942, an unhealed wound which recurs in another personal disaster, Rübner moved to Hebrew.<sup>13</sup> The language of the land of immigration becomes his formal poetic language, even though he continued to think through central modes and figures of the German tradition. I claim that this shift, which can be understood both in existential and political terms, is not monolithic or one-directional but rather translanguaging. In crossing the lines between separate traditions of language, Rübner’s poetics transcends the binary model based on monolingual poles and hegemonic culture, while escaping the dead-end dichotomy of “everything is translatable” and “nothing is translatable.” I intend to demonstrate this movement by focusing on varied examples of autotranslation, as well as on Rübner’s late poems that refer to Franz Kafka’s mythical figure of the hunter Gracchus.

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, Brenner mentions how translation, once regarded as a derivative art form or second-order representation, has more recently garnered attention as a mechanism of literary change in Itamar Even-Zohar; a means of establishing literary value in Pascale Casanova; a process of literary manipulation in Andre Lefevere; and an interpretative art in Lawrence Venuti (2016, 15).

<sup>9</sup> Naomi Brenner, *Lingering Bilingualism: Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literatures in Contact* (NY: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Emily Apter, “Against World Literature,” in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. David Damrosch (Malden MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 347.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>13</sup> Compare with Giddon Ticotsky, “A German Island in Israel: Lea Goldberg and Tuvia Rübner’s Republic of Letters,” *Naharaim* 10, no. 1 (2016): 127–149, here 133–136.

### Emigration: Caesura, Hebrew

Following his immigration from Bratislava to Palestine in the 1940s, Rübner's early poems were written in German, whereas his first published poems were written in Hebrew. More than sixteen poetry collections followed his 1957 debut volume. Only in 1995 were his German-language poems written in the 1940s published.<sup>14</sup> In 1990, Piper Verlag published a translation of Rübner's poetry into German by Christoph Meckel and Efrat Gal-Ed, which seemed to open the way for the poet (at this point a well-known translator of the Israeli Nobel Prize laureate, Shmuel Yosef Agnon) to begin to translate his own work.<sup>15</sup> Over the following years Rübner published eight self-translated poetry collections with Rimbaud Verlag. Surprisingly, very little research or comprehensive scholarship has been devoted to examining the issue of self- or autotranslation in Rübner's poetry.<sup>16</sup> The surprise is accentuated in light of the long tradition of multilingualism associated with the modern Jewish experience and the emergence of modern Hebrew literature.<sup>17</sup>

The epilogue to the German translation of his poems by Gal-Ed and Meckel between 1987–1989 sheds light on the movement from German into Hebrew and back to German: "I wrote my poems in a language which I hardly speak today. The language of being-at-home (Zuhause), through which I continued to speak with my parents, with my sister, my grandparents, my relatives and friends — those who do not have a grave" (my translation from German).<sup>18</sup> There was a moment, however, when Rübner felt that he could no longer continue this poetry which locked him into the past. As he later admits, continuing to write in German meant cutting himself off from the life he was struggling to engage in; a deepening rupture from an ongoing present of the new family and friends he tried to establish in order to survive.

Following another personal tragedy that reverberated with the previous loss of his family in the Holocaust, Rübner changed to Hebrew. In his autobiography he describes this choice in terms of a radical tear — a "caesura."<sup>19</sup> However, retrospectively it transpires that this change did not erase the past, but rather facilitated an ongoing transition between past and present, German and Hebrew. As opposed to acting out traumatic events (compulsive repetition), or an ideological repression of the past (the

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<sup>14</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Granatapfel: Frühe Gedichte* (Aachen: Rimbaud, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Wüstenginster. Gedichte*, transl. Efrat Gal-Ed and Christoph Meckel (München, Zürich: Piper, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Exceptional which indicates the general is Rachel Seelig, "Stuttering in Verse: Tuvia Rübner and the Art of Self-Translation," in *The German-Hebrew Dialogue: Studies of Encounter and Exchange*, eds. Amir Eshel and Rachel Seelig (Berlin, Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2018), 77–104. Of special relevance to the issue of German-Hebrew bilingualism is: Na'ama Rokem, "Dan Pagis's Laboratory: Between German and Hebrew," in *The German Hebrew Dialogue*, ed. Amir Eshel and Rachel Seelig (Berlin, Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2018), 61–76.

<sup>17</sup> As shown for example in Itamar Even-Zohar, "Aspects of the Hebrew-Yiddish Polysystem," *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (1990): 121–130; Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007); Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Anita Norich, "Under Whose Sign? Hebraism and Yiddishism as Paradigms of Modern Jewish Literary History," *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010): 774–784; Chana Kronfeld, "The Joint Literary Historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish," in *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Joshua L. Miller and Anita Norich (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 15–35.

<sup>18</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Wüstenginster. Gedichte*, transl. Efrat Gal-Ed and Christoph Meckel (München, Zürich: Piper, 1990), 66–67.

<sup>19</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Khayyim arukim ktzarim*, 64–65.

negation of exile), Rübner's poetics demonstrates a unique coexistence of that which occurs and that which has stopped, between the living and the dead.

The hardships in acquiring Hebrew were not only cognitive, namely the skills needed for the learning of a new language, but also psychological, as speaking and even more writing in Hebrew meant abandoning the mother tongue in favor of the language spoken in the land of immigration. Feelings of betrayal are intertwined with the desire for survival as shown in the poem "Hebrew, My Love" from Rübner's collection *Contradictory Poems*.<sup>20</sup> The poem depicts an analogy between Hebrew, the language of the new land, and a woman, with whom the poet experiences a relationship of attraction and rejection:

It's been a lifetime together.  
Fifty years? Sixty? How many?  
We were never like that coiled knot  
only the slash of the sword could undo.  
I turned my back on you.  
You turned your back on me  
though still we pulled toward each other like magnets to the pole  
like the moon and the tides.<sup>21</sup>

The personification of the language demonstrates the poet's failure to master his art. This is not a one-directional process, as the back turning is mutual. The poet describes not only the acquisition and adoption of a new language but also an inability to talk about the disaster. Accordingly, the personification of the language is a poetic projection of the poet's complex emotional state resulting from his traumatic life experience. The mechanism of desire revolves around repulsion as a projection of the poet's ambivalence toward the new language. Impotence, fear of failure, feelings of betraying the mother tongue, are revealed in the depiction:

I conjugated at your will, I accepted your grammared sentences  
I queried your roots,  
I stuttered, became silent, I begged and whispered,  
and you, turning inward, saw nothing.  
Until suddenly, you opened up wide like a field in the wind  
and your voice burst forth from my throat.<sup>22</sup>

Using the verb "stutter" has a dual meaning in the depiction of the inability to speak the new language but also as a mode of expression that characterizes Rübner's translingual poetics. Despite the closure of the poem, which suggests an apparent synthesis of the contradictory forces, the dissonant stuttering continues also when the process of acquiring Hebrew is completed. This is conveyed through the distinction between "voice" and "throat" and between "your" and "my," which cannot be ignored here. Far more than German or Hebrew, Rübner's poetry becomes a net of voices — these voices of the self and the other that he recalls and encounters in the "poetic realm." Moreover, the voices are always in transition, as the Hebrew reverberates with the German and vice versa. Such movement is demonstrated for instance when Rübner translates his own poems.

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<sup>20</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Shirim sotrim* (Ra'anana: Even Hoshen, 2011), 14.

<sup>21</sup> Tuvia Rübner, "Hebrew, My Love," in *In the Illuminated Dark: Selected Poems of Tuvia Rübner*, transl. Rachel Tzvia Back (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2014), 279.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

In emigration the caesura involves not only the language but primarily the place. After leaving a country sometimes under threat and a risk to life the original place becomes even if not physically, but certainly mentally inaccessible. For Rübner this is the case with Bratislava, his hometown from where his parents and sister were expelled and murdered a year after he himself immigrated to Israel. The poem “A Postcard from Pressburg-Bratislava” from the poetry collection *Later Day Poems* depicts this impossible return.<sup>23</sup>

Shahar Bram defines Rübner’s postcard poems as a unique genre which plays a role in his work of memory:

These poems subvert the stereotypical, commercial image that tourist postcards seek to create. The name of the poem and its structure signal such postcards but attempt to reshape their appearance, to broaden the borders of the present time and turn the past into an integral part of it. Instead of a superficial, external view of the city — the silent commercial view — the poet offers a memento that combines presence and absence, the visual and the verbal, and inner and outer reality; individual memory is woven into collective memory and remakes it.<sup>24</sup>

I claim that not only the ekphrastic relationships (the mingling of visual images and verbal signs) are crucial to Rübner’s work of memory. Also the interweaving of the Hebrew language with the German within a translingual zone plays a key role in bearing witness to that which is lost.

The poem opens with the city’s diverse names: “Bratislava is Pressburg is Pozsony. / For me it is Pressburg.”<sup>25</sup> This resonates with a long history of conquerors, from the Hungarian to the Austrian, and up to the Slovakian. The reader follows the poet’s walk on the streets tracing familiar sites, some of which no longer exist: “Near the Cathedral the Neologist Synagogue once stood [...] / Below is Fish Square, / above is where the Street of the Jews began. The Danube flows as always.” Rübner tells of the absence of the Jews in Bratislava, for him, Pressburg, the city where he had “a small and happy childhood.”<sup>26</sup>

Looking together with his teacher at an old photograph of his schoolmates the latter recalls: “this one was a Nazi, and this one and that one too. This one / was especially brutal. This one fell in Russia / and that one was deported. Which of the Jewish pupils / survived — I do not know.” Along with the physical absence of the Jewish sites the teacher’s memory reveals lacunas as well: “Pressburg was a tri-lingual city. Its fourth language / is silence.” Against this void Rübner writes his poem. In what language, however?

A German version of the Hebrew poem from 1999 was published under the title “Pressburg, heute Bratislava” in the poetry collection *Lichtschatten. Gedichte*.<sup>27</sup> Reading both the Hebrew and the German texts reveals a translingual movement, which challenges the concept of original and translation, and of translated and translating language, on the one hand, as well as the argument for two different poems, on the other. The poem culminates with departure: “This is an old old city. / So old I

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<sup>23</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Shirim me’ukharim* (Tel Aviv: Keshev Leshira, 1999): 16.

<sup>24</sup> Shahar Bram, “Postcards from Europe: The Workings of Memory and the Role of Language in Tuvia Rübner’s Postcard Poems,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 10, no. 2 (2016): 155.

<sup>25</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *In the Illuminated Dark: Selected Poems of Tuvia Rübner*, 149.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Tuvia Rübner, “Pressburg, heute Bratislava,” in *Lichtschatten. Gedichte* (Aachen: Rimbaud, 2011), 25.

barely know her anymore. / Farewell, beloved, it's unimaginable." The poet speaks of the city while projecting his own age mentioned a few lines earlier: "I am old. I can walk only slowly now."<sup>28</sup>

The romantic personification of the city (Pressburg) as "beloved," like that of the language (Hebrew) as "love," in the previous poem, embodies the mechanism of desire and shame, attraction and rejection. In both poems there is no complete synthesis. The caesura reminds the reader of the im/e/migration wound intertwined with the catastrophe of the Second World War. Rübner emphasizes the caesura in the language of the German version which can be understood, however, only in comparison with the Hebrew version. Whereas the Hebrew text brings the improbability of the return (farewell) in a whole line "Farewell, beloved, it's unimaginable" (להתראות, אהובה, קשה לשער), the German text truncates the last line: "Auf Wiedersehen, Liebe, kaum." The abrupt ending of the line has to do with a distracted idiom: "kaum zu glauben." The word "kaum" becomes a trace and a reminder of the complete idiom as opposed to the Hebrew version. The essence of the caesura is revealed when reading both the German and the Hebrew versions simultaneously, as part of a whole; or according to Hokenson and Munson, "bi-discursivity focusing outward to cultural spaces," thus bridging traditions and audiences in unique ways.<sup>29</sup>

The return to the emigrated land is impossible not only because of the life established in the immigrated land, but also because the family members are no longer alive. Unable to go back "home" and incapable of getting out of it due to the feelings of guilt and an endless need to mourn his beloved, the poet is split between two worlds. No wonder he refers in a later poem to the Hunter Gracchus from Kafka's stories. Like Kafka, the Prague-born Jewish author, who writes in German, while pointing out the "impossibility of writing in German,"<sup>30</sup> Rübner embodies this split by means of literary imagination. Using linguist strategies which combine tradition with innovation, he creates a translingual poetics that condenses various cultural realms and transgresses the lines between past and present, the living and the dead.

### **Tradition: Perpetuation, German**

In the prologue of *Im halben Licht. Gedichte* (2016), Rübner's last collection of German translations of his Hebrew poems, he writes:

Am I a Hebrew or a German poet? I am obviously not a German poet, but rather an Israeli, undoubtedly Jewish, the son of Jewish parents, whose mother tongue is German [...], and for 12 years wrote only German poems as an immigrant in Eretz-Israel Palestine, who still translates his poems from Hebrew into German and vice versa, because even after 75 years in Israel he still writes German poems, and for whom [...] after almost 65 years of writing in Hebrew, a German poem sounds more intimate than a Hebrew one.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Tuvia Ruebner, *In the Illuminated Dark: Selected Poems of Tuvia Ruebner*, 149.

<sup>29</sup> Jan Walsh Hokenson, Marcella Munson, *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation*, 207.

<sup>30</sup> In his letter to Max Brod of June 1921 Kafka reflected on the Jewish writers in Prague, who "existed among three impossibilities": "The impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German and the impossibility of writing differently". See Franz Kafka, *Briefe*, ed. Max Brod (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1975), 337–338.

<sup>31</sup> Tuvia Rübner, "Eine kurze Einführung," in *Im halben Licht. Gedichte* (Aachen: Rimbaud, 2016), 5.

It is hard to dismiss Rübner's ironic tone when relating to his own experience as a writer. Asking himself whether he is a "Hebrew or a German poet," he admits how after all these years of writing in Hebrew as an Israeli, the intimacy of a poem lies for him in its German sound. Here Rübner's "homecoming" is revealed: not by breaking away from the German into the Hebrew while erasing the difference between the languages (making the unfamiliar familiar), but by keeping this difference alive — a singular poetics in dual discourse. As mentioned, Rübner's first attempts at writing were in his native tongue, German, an anomaly in the literary landscape of the day, in which immigrant writers more commonly adopted the newly reborn Hebrew. In this sense, Rübner refused to conform to the rules of the period's political agenda, which encouraged immigrants to speak and to write in the formal language of the land. His choice of writing in Hebrew was rather a consequence of mourning connected to a drive for survival, which as I will show, enabled him to recall the dead without giving up the living. An inner personal censorship rather than an external political censorship directed him into Hebrew, which however, did not deny or erase the German. In fact, the German tradition remained pertinent for Rübner. As a professor at Haifa University, he taught courses on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Heinrich von Kleist, and Franz Kafka, among others; he was closely connected to Lea Goldberg, Werner Kraft and Ludwig Strauss, who read his poems in German; and he edited and translated canonical works from German and into German.<sup>32</sup>

Regarding translation, here, too, Rübner was an advocate of the German tradition. Since the 18th century based on the work of the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, the issue of the strangeness, namely that which cannot be entirely transferred, elaborated and integrated from one language to the other, became a way of distinguishing two different modes of translation.<sup>33</sup> This approach to translation, which was further developed by Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin, as well as by Theodor W. Adorno and Ludwig Strauss, was adopted by Rübner.<sup>34</sup> In his autobiography he mentions Rosenzweig, emphasizing the way the original language estranges the translating language: "We read in the epilogue that the translation does not mean a Germanization of the foreign language, but rather the estrangement of the German, otherwise the human tone, mind, heartbeat cannot be heard."<sup>35</sup> Looking at

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<sup>32</sup> On the relationship between Rübner and Lea Goldberg, including his editorial project see Tictsky, *A German Island in Israel: Lea Goldberg and Tuvia Rübner's Republic of Letters*, 137–139.

<sup>33</sup> The essay from 1813 discusses two different modes of translation; one that brings the reader to the original text, the other that brings the original text to the reader. See: Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translating," in *Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche*, edited by Douglas Robinson (Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, 2002), 225–237.

<sup>34</sup> Rübner's interest in Benjamin, whose work on Baudelaire translated into Hebrew he edited, and in Adorno is demonstrated for instance in his correspondence with Goldberg; on his relationship to Strauss regarding the issue of translation see quotation in Back, *In the Illuminated Dark: Selected Poems of Tuvia Rübner*, xxix: "As a devoted student of Ludwig Strauss, I knew that sound plays a central role in the meaning of a poem, and aside from rare instances, we are unable to transfer sound from one language to another."

<sup>35</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Ein langes kurzes Leben: von Preßburg nach Merchavia*, 98; compare with Franz Rosenzweig, "Nachwort zu den Hymnen und Gedichten des Jehuda Halevi," in *Die Schrift: Aufsätze, Übertragungen und Briefe*, ed. Karl Thieme (Königstein/Ts: Jüdischer Verlag Athenäum, 1984), 83. See also Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings 1, 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael M. Jennings, transl. Harry Zohn, 253–263. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996).



Rübner's oeuvre encourages the reader to examine the extent to which his Hebrew never entirely deleted the traces of the German. This issue becomes more salient with regard to his autotranslation. Rather than replacing one language (German) with the other (Hebrew) in an ultimate translation (everything is translatable), or principally avoiding it, especially poetic translation (nothing is translatable), the poet creates a space in which both languages play a role through an ongoing oscillation.

In applying Deleuze's definition of stuttering, as Rachel Seelig correctly explains:

It is perhaps appropriately inconsistent [...] to describe the German and Hebrew halves of his bilingual oeuvre as simultaneously complimentary and antagonistic. Insofar as the German and Hebrew versions differ and yet 'echo' one another, their pairing forms a vocal hesitation between languages and between thought and speech that is antithetical to conventional notions of fluency and mastery.<sup>36</sup>

However, whereas Seelig uses "echo" as a metaphor it is important to emphasize the role of the sound components in Rübner's translanguaging. Accordingly, Rübner, who continued to write in German alongside Hebrew, demonstrates not necessarily a polar bilingualism, but rather a translanguaging poetics that conveys possibilities of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability. This poetics reverberates with the wound generated in the split between Europe and Israel, Bratislava and Merhavia, the family he once had and the family he established. The split that cannot be spoken of is conveyed through the sound — that of a ruptured sentence. Like a musical dissonant, which calls for a solution that never arrives, the torn word keeps longing for the whole sentence. As a mode of perpetuation, the break reminds one of that which was once complete, a presence that was lost.

The fragments, "Air" and "Being" from *Contradictory Poems*, originally written in Hebrew and translated into German under the volume title *Lichtschatten: Gedichte* demonstrate this. The trace of a duration is conveyed through the fragmentation — a prompt cut, unexpected stillness:

LUFT	אוויר
Es gibt sie	קיים
und	ולא
es gibt sie nicht <sup>37</sup>	קיים <sup>39</sup>
SEIN	קיים
Es ist.	יש
Es kann nicht sein, es	לא יתכן, זה
ist. <sup>38</sup>	יש. <sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Rachel Seelig, "Stuttering in Verse: Tuvia Rübner and the Art of Self-Translation", 99.

<sup>37</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Lichtschatten*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Lichtschatten*, 55.

<sup>39</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Shirim sotrim*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Shirim sotrim*, 27.

As I showed elsewhere, additional conflict based on a caesura is conveyed through “The Shortest Poem (on Life),” which consists of three words only: “Noch / Nicht / Mehr” (more / no / more).

Noch	עוד
Nicht	לא
Mehr <sup>41</sup>	<sup>42</sup> עוד

Vertically, each word disconnects from the other; horizontally, however, they long for a connection, thus demonstrating a paradoxical time concept that juxtaposes “before” (not yet) and “afterward” (no more). Through the poem, the contradictory concepts of time — also the time of trauma — mingle and intertwine without, however, excluding each other. Rübner interweaves these separate moments of “too early” and “too late” in a way that “one after the other” resonates with “one next to the other,” as well as with “one as a part of the other.” The absence reverberates with the presence, the living with the dead, and the foreign with the intimate — contradictory forces, which nevertheless coexist. He displaces the words and sounds in German and in Hebrew along the sentence, cutting off, breaking, negating and contradicting. Reading both the German and the Hebrew texts in synchronization emphasizes the similarities of a stereophonic poetics.

In an interview with Toby Perl Freilich from 2014 Rübner uses a musical analogy to define the German tradition and himself as opposed to other Israeli poets:

I come from a German tradition; they, though native German speakers, were formed more by an Anglo-Saxon/British one [...] I like Goldberg because she’s close to the Russian/German tradition of *Innigkeit* — like the pianissimo of Mahler.<sup>43</sup>

The German word *Innigkeit* (intimacy, interior depth) appears in English as a foreign relic. Two years later Rübner would repeat this word when he writes how “a German poem sounds more intimate than a Hebrew one” (ein deutsches Gedicht klingt inniger als ein hebräisches).<sup>44</sup> I claim that the music of Mahler (as well as Haydn, Bach, Mozart and other composers he alludes to), like the sound of a German poem, become an integral part of Rübner’s intercultural translanguaging. In placing German tradition at the core of Hebrew culture, he challenges the boundaries of the hegemonic culture. In setting the different languages in motion his poetics not only interferes with hierarchical relations, but also escapes the binaries of translatability. This poetics thus reflects on the foreign and the remote, the otherness that is out of reach, while enabling it to resonate with silence, the fourth language of Rübner’s European hometown.

<sup>41</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Wunderbarer Wahn. Gedichte* (Aachen: Rimbaud Verlag, 2014), 50.

<sup>42</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Akronim* (Tel Aviv: Keshev Leshira, 2013), 53.

<sup>43</sup> Toby Perl Freilich, “Tuvia Ruebner Never Stops Mourning the Lost, New English Translations of the 90-year-old’s Israel Prize-Winning Work remind us why he’s the Doyen of Postwar Poets,” *Tablet*, May 12, 2014. <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/tuvia-ruebner-never-stops-mourning-the-lost>.

<sup>44</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Im halben Licht*, 5.

### Translingualism: Against Surfing, Globalization

Another aspect of the oscillation between languages and cultural traditions in Rübner's poetics is demonstrated in his references to Kafka.<sup>45</sup> In his last poetry collection *More No More* (2019), two poems allude explicitly to the hunter Gracchus from Kafka's story published posthumously in *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer* (The Great Wall of China).<sup>46</sup> Kafka's story begins with a boat carrying the long-dead hunter Gracchus as it arrives in the port of Riva. The mayor of Riva meets Gracchus who confesses that he died while hunting in the Black Forest. Accidentally the boat that was supposed to carry him to the next world never got there, thus dooming him to endless motion:

I am forever [...] on the great stair that leads up to it. On that infinitely wide and spacious stair I clamber about, sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes on the right, sometimes on the left, always in motion.<sup>47</sup>

Engaging in a dialogue with the mayor, Gracchus recalls:

I had been glad to live and I was glad to die. Before I stepped aboard, I joyfully flung away my wretched load of ammunition, my knapsack, my hunting rifle that I had always been proud to carry, and I slipped into my winding sheet like a girl into her marriage dress. I lay and waited. Then came the mishap.<sup>48</sup>

Gracchus's misfortune (due to the mysterious "mishap") lies in his inability to find rest and peace in his death. The horror is embedded in the spilt, in being up and down, left and right, a living-dead who is on the road forever, "always in motion." This movement encouraged scholars to identify Gracchus with various archetypal figures such as Nimrod (the Biblical hunter), Ahasuerus (the Wandering Jew), and to different hermeneutic realms of Jewish, Christian and even Buddhist traditions.<sup>49</sup>

Why and how does Rübner return to this story in two of his late poems? In the first poem "Do Not" (לֹא), the poet, facing his death, directly looks at Gracchus. He imagines himself slipping into a galabia just like the hunter Gracchus who slipped into his winding sheet. In the next line this slipping is compared to wave surfing, which is a "surfing into the void. / Amen."<sup>50</sup> Perhaps tired of the heavy burden the poet has to carry throughout his life, he longs for his upcoming death and imagines this moment as a redemptive release. In the second poem, "Riva, No" (רִיבָה, לֹא), in contrast, the poet turns his gaze away from Gracchus, not wishing to see how he is carried from the boat to the mayor's house or to hear his confession. Moreover, the first poem culminates in repentance. The last word of the poem "Amen" (אָמֵן) is taken from a prayer's repertoire. Now it is associated with a negative revelation as the holy name of God (לֵאלֹהִים)

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<sup>45</sup> Rübner relates to Kafka for instance in his conversation with Natan Ofek, "She-habiliti nitpas bilti nitpas huh," In *Sihot 'al Kafka ve'od*, ed. Lea Tzivoni (Jerusalem: Tsivonim Publishing House, 2004), 43–54.

<sup>46</sup> Franz Kafka, "Jäger Gracchus," in *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer. Ungedruckte Erzählungen und Prosa aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. Max Brod (Berlin: Kiepenheuer, 1931), 40–43.

<sup>47</sup> Franz Kafka, "The Hunter Gracchus," in *The Complete Stories*, transl. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 258.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>49</sup> Compare with Rainer Nägele, "Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Paradies: Versuch einer Interpretation zu Kafkas 'Der Jäger Gracchus'," *The German Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1974): 60–72; on interpretations by Adorno, Freud and Yerushalmi see Harold Bloom, "Jewish Culture and Jewish Memory," *Dialectical Anthropology* 8, no. 1/2 (1983): 7–19.

<sup>50</sup> Tuvia Rübner, *Od lo od* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2019), 43.

is traced in the negation “Do not” (לֹא), which opens the poem and constitutes its title. The second poem ends on a different note. Asking whether the memory of the hard disk would last longer than the human memory, the poem culminates in severe doubt: “who knows. / and what could be known?,”<sup>51</sup> perhaps in reply to Kafka’s Gracchus who concludes: “I am here, more than that I do not know.”<sup>52</sup>

The foreign words of both poems deserve further thought. Whereas the word hard disk is written in Hebrew letters (transcription), the word surfing appears in Latin letters. In both cases the foreign word refers to new technologies. In this sense, the metaphor of the wave surfing stands not only for the wishful thinking of a redemptive departure from this sorrowful world, but also refers to the new media and its digital devices. What promise lies in these innovative memory devices? Can they really remember or are they simply another form of oblivion? These questions relate, for instance, to the virtual memory conveyed through hundreds of photographs and images of the disasters in the 21st century which abound on the internet. What do the horrific visuals of boats sailing, this time from the Middle East or Africa to Europe, without reaching any promised land, tell their viewers? The sinking boats of refugees fleeing for their lives but who found their death in the Mediterranean waters bring a much darker perspective to the story than Rübner suggests.

In this reading, the catastrophe of the 20th century recurs in the 21st century in stories of expulsion and violence, loss, and indifference to evil and the pain of the other. The consumption of these images by surfing the internet is no different from the silence embedded in the postcard from Pressburg. The denial of the crimes on the one hand, and the voyeur’s gaze on the other, both fail to bear witness to the horror and the pain of the victims.

Returning to the poem, English, a third language brought into the intersection of German and Hebrew, tends to expose a critical perspective regarding modern cultures of memory. Unlike Gracchus’s infinite motion, which embodies the split between different landscapes and periods of time, between the living and the dead, (wave) surfing is always on the surface. The surfing is anonymous, like the faces and life stories in the viral images shot on thousands of screens. In dismissing the intimacy Rübner looks for when facing the other, the surfing neglects the deep wound. The digital consumption of 21st century catastrophes demonstrates a global homogeneous movement that erases differences and defers responsibility. In contrast, Gracchus’s boat is forever in motion, switching between worlds like Rübner’s oscillation between diverse cultures and languages. Both provide a countermovement to the global surfing, one that bears witness to the other embodied in different traditions and life stories.

To conclude, twelve years after emigrating from Bratislava to Palestine during the Second World War, Tuvia Rübner, a native German speaker, adopted Hebrew as his formal poetic language. In the 1990s he began to translate his poems into German. Rübner perceived the move into the language of the new land as a caesura — an essential break from the language and culture of the homeland that he had to make in order to survive. Despite this decision and the fact that Rübner was known until his death in 2019 as a Hebrew poet, he never stopped writing and thinking in German.

The article focuses on the relationship between German and Hebrew traditions in some of Rübner’s poems in order to better understand his work. Based on theories of translation studies and comparative literature, I claim that this shift from the mother

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>52</sup> Kafka, *The Hunter Gracchus*, 261.0

tongue to the language of the land of immigration should not be perceived as monolithic or unidirectional, but rather as translingual and intercultural. I followed Hokenson and Munson's conclusions on bilingualism to address Rübner's self-translations from Hebrew into German and vice versa. Accordingly, I focused on the way these translations demonstrate a singular poetics of dual discourse rather than two separate versions. Following Brenner, I adopted the term translingualism to emphasize the movement not only between languages but also between cultures, which characterizes Rübner's poetics as a zone of intercultural intersections. I showed how, in so doing, Rübner challenges the hegemonic center of the land of immigration. Finally, I drew inspiration from Apter's invitation to rethink the issues of translation in the era of globalization, namely, thinking beyond the traditional binary of original and translating languages, and questioning the dichotomy between the massive globalization processes reflected in the concept of "everything is translatable" versus its absolute rejection under the romantic principle of "nothing is translatable."

In crossing the lines between separate traditions of language, Rübner's poetry transcends the binary model based on monolingual poles and hegemonic culture, while escaping the dichotomy of un/translatability. His translingual poetics becomes a zone of countermovement that testifies to the wound — the caesura generated by immigration and the loss of his family in the Holocaust, which in turn resonates with the disaster of the 21st century refugees. Against the backdrop of denial and indifference this "always in motion" refuses to heal the split — precisely by reverberating the other with the self, the lost tradition with a present creation, and the living with the dead.

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#### **GRACCHUS'S BOAT: EMIGRATION, TRADITION, AND TRANSLINGUALISM IN THE WORK OF TUVIA RÜBNER**

This article explores the relationship between German and Hebrew in the work of the poet Tuvia Rübner, who emigrated from Slovakia to Israel in 1941. Even though his first poems were written in German, his published poems were in Hebrew. Only in the 1990s did he start translating his poems and publishing in German. I claim, however, that this shift is neither monolithic nor one-directional but rather translingual. In continuously crossing the lines between different traditions of language, Rübner's poetics transcends the binary model based on hegemonic culture, on the one hand, while providing a countermovement to global standardization, on the other. By focusing on examples of autotranslation, as well as on Rübner's late poems that refer to Franz Kafka's mythical figure of the hunter Gracchus, I suggest that this oscillation ethically bears witness to the other embodied in different life stories.

KEY WORDS: emigration, tradition, translingualism, Tuvia Rübner

## **LÓDŹ GRAKCHUSA: EMIGRACJA, TRADYCJA I TRANSLINGWIZM W TWÓRCZOŚCI TUVII RÜBNERA**

Celem tego artykułu jest zbadanie relacji pomiędzy niemieckością i hebrajskością w wierszach Tuvii Rübnera, który wyemigrował ze Słowacji do Izraela w 1941 roku. Chociaż jego pierwsze wiersze pisane były w języku niemieckim, Rübner zadebiutował utworami w języku hebrajskim. Zaczął tłumaczyć swoje wiersze i publikować je w Niemczech dopiero w latach 90. Stawiam jednak tezę, że ta zmiana nie jest ani monolityczna, ani jednokierunkowa, lecz raczej translingwalna. Poprzez ciągłe przekraczanie granic pomiędzy dwiema różnymi tradycjami językowymi poeta Rübnera z jednej strony przestaje wpisywać się w binarny model zakorzeniony w hegemonicznej kulturze, z drugiej zaś przeciwstawia się globalnej standaryzacji. Analizując przykłady autotłumaczenia jak również późniejsze wiersze Rübnera nawiązujące do stworzonej przez Franza Kafkę postaci mitycznego łowcy Grakchusa sugeruję, że takie oscylowanie pomiędzy językami świadczy o obecności 'innego' zakorzenionej w życiowych doświadczeniach.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** emigracja, tradycja, translingwizm, Tuvia Rübner