

DEPARTMENT OF HEBREW AND JEWISH STUDIES: PURIM SHPIL 2016

The Purim Shpil has a long and rich tradition in Yiddish dating from the fifteenth century. Purim shpils were traditionally based on the biblical scroll of Esther, on other biblical dramas or on unrelated subjects. Over the centuries they have incorporated satire, parody, burlesque, music.

This year's Purim Shpil was found in Helsinki, Finland in 2005 by Simo Muir. It is thought to have been written during the Holocaust. It is not based on the traditional Purim story although we can perhaps understand the two protagonists as symbolically representing Esther and Haman.

1.

Akhashveyrosh: Niels Hoelmer

Vashti: Katie Power

Mordechai: Isobel Carter

Esther: Jemima Jarman

Haman: Seth Anziska

2.

Trante: Elisabeth Eichinger

Peyske/Narrator: William Pimlott

Farmer: Michael Berkowitz

Ante the Policeman: Niels Hoelmer

Waiter: Isobel Carter

Violinist: Die Hu

Die plays the Sakkijarvi Polka. It was popular in Finland during the 2nd World War, and continues to be very popular. Sakkijarvi is the name of a town.

1. *Our very short version of the longer Purim Megile*

Akhashveyrosh is a Persian king who rules over 127 lands stretching between Hodu (India) and Kush (Ethiopia). He commands his wife Vashti to attend a banquet and to display her beauty. Vashti refuses - the King 'gets rid of her' noting that wives must obey their husbands.

There is a contest to find a new wife for the King. Esther, a Jewish girl/woman is chosen. Mordechai, Esther's cousin/uncle (?) discovers a plot to kill the King. Haman is a minister at the King's court who relishes his own importance and power. He insists that all must bow down to him. Mordechai refuses. Haman plans to take revenge by killing all the Jews.

Mordechai asks Esther to help as she is married to the King. She invites Akhashveyrosh and Haman to two banquets. She implores the King to save her people. He agrees and Haman is to be hanged.

2. *A Purim story about a young wife in war-time* by Jac Weinstein (1883-1976)
[*A purim geshikhte vegn a yunge vaybl in a tsayt fun milkhome*].
In Finnish 'Lithuanian' Yiddish with Baltic Yiddish influences.

There are 2 central characters and the shpil in its original form is a monologue spoken by the young wife. I have adapted it so we could have more people taking part.

Trante¹ our heroine speaks to an unnamed audience. She recounts an episode which as a young pregnant wife might have left her "flattened" or divorced. She tells her story in secret, it musn't be recounted. She is clearly devout, referring to God as the one who performs wonders and protects young wives.

Trante's husband Peyske² kept going on about Purim, instructing her to cook good food and not to forget the Homentashn. She is frustrated that he seems to have forgotten that it's war-time and she resolves to "run around mindlessly" in search of food. She likes the idea of having a Purim feast, despite everything. She hatches a plan that will "make you laugh".

She sets off for the countryside to buy food because "my Peyske loves to '*fres*'" (gorge himself). She gets off the train at Tsheyklaks station³ where she encounters a farmer. He offers to sell her products such as cheese, butter, eggs, cream, flour. She goes to his house, has a coffee and makes the purchases. Happy that she can now celebrate Purim, she sets off for home.

On the train, a policeman suddenly appears. Her heart sinks as the '*yape*'⁴ grabs at the packages, taking the cheese and butter. He grabs her by the neck and pulls her off the train..... "May his brains split in half, pestering a quiet dove, a pious, pure, pregnant woman!"

"My head started too thump and my *poopik* (belly-button) trembled."

She devises a plan. She smiles at the policeman, tells him of nice places where they can go... he doesn't need much persuading. Trante tells us that what happened next is hard to believe and swears that she will happily cradle her baby as she tells us no lies.

They go to a restaurant⁵ and the policeman starts to address her informally (du..). He asks her to tell him her real name. She has no intention of divulging her real name and says that she is called Trante. He is called Ante⁶. Things get cosier, the alcohol is flowing but Trante only rinses her lips with a tiny bit. Ante encourages

¹ Means 'wreck' or 'ruin' in Yiddish.

² Affectionate form of name Peysakh.

³ Parody of how Yiddish speakers would have pronounced Koklax.

⁴ Pejorative word for a Finn, synonymous with *goy*.

⁵ Poetic license. I have named the restaurant 'Hakkarainen'. This is a Finnish surname. 'Hak arayn' is something that could be said to someone in Yiddish to mean 'stuff yourself', before eating.

⁶ Yiddish version of Finnish name Antti, which is Finnish version of Swedish name Andreas.

her to drink but she says she cannot because she has something growing in her tummy. She keeps pouring him more to drink.

He asks if she will become his very own Trante and also take his surname Jaaskelainen⁷. He promises her the earth. She agrees as she feels that she has no option whilst thinking "worms will feed on you before I forget my Peyske". He starts to joke, hug and tickle Trante who keeps checking the packets of produce. She's glad that Peyske can't see her now or there'd be a divorce, uproar, scandal.

Trante repeats that God protects all young wives; she makes sure that the policeman is truly drunk and then escapes with all the packages....

A huge thank you to everyone who has participated in the Purim Shpil. Many thanks to Belinda and Vanessa.

And especially to Simo Muir who sent this never-performed Purim Shpil in my direction; who originally transcribed and translated it from the original Yiddish, and whose footnotes have been used liberally here.

And... not least, who has travelled from Leeds (where he is Research Fellow for an AHRC project 'Performing the Jewish Archive') to see what we have done with this precious Finnish Yiddish text.

Helen Beer

⁷ Common Finnish family name.