



Linguistic Internationalism

Wolf's cosmopolitan background is evident in Sterne's linguistic internationalism. The dialogue is in both German and Bulgarian; the movie begins with one of Mordechai Gebirtig's Yiddish laments and includes the Hebrew prayer "Eli, Eli." The teacher addresses her pupils in Greek, but, among themselves, the Jews speak Ladino—making Sterne the only feature I know with dialogue in the language of the Sephardim. ()*

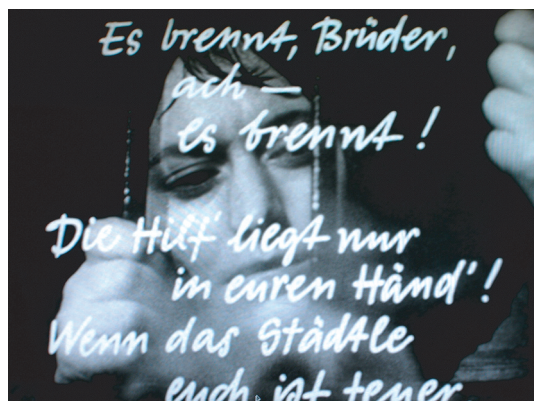
– Jim Hoberman, Village Voice, Jan 13, 1998

Sterne (Stars) is a linguistically remarkable film. Actors include native speakers of German, Bulgarian, and Ladino. Walter, the German corporal, speaks Bulgarian to the local residents, while the Greek Jew Ruth, who normally speaks Ladino, uses Greek when teaching the children their alphabet. This linguistic mix is very close to what one might have heard in the historical situation represented in the film.

Ladino was spoken by Sephardic Jews, whose ancestors emigrated from the Iberian Peninsula primarily to the Ottoman Empire (what is today Turkey and the Balkans) after their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Ladino is a composite language rooted in early modern Spanish, with admixtures of Hebrew, Aramaic, Turkish, Arabic, and other languages—including Greek, as we hear in *Stars*.

The music in the film, in contrast, is based on the traditional Jewish song "Eli, Eli" and the song "S'brent" ("It Is Burning"), penned by Mordechai Gebirtig (1888-1942) in response to the 1936 pogrom in the Polish town of Prytyk. Both these songs are in Yiddish, although "Eli, Eli" also incorporates a prayer in Hebrew. Like Ladino, Yiddish is a composite language, but it has German, Slavic, and Hebrew linguistic roots and was the primary language of the Ashkenazic Jews of Eastern Europe.

"S'brent," which exhorts its listeners to "put out the fire," warned of the impending calamity of the Holocaust and became the anthem of the underground Jewish resistance in the Krakow ghetto, where Gebirtig lived before his death in 1942. The director's decision to display the lyrics of the last verse on screen as the film ends – in German – underlines both the antifascist message of *Stars* and the importance of the film as a site of admonition and reflection for its German audience: "You alone can help! If the town is dear to you, Grab your buckets, quench the flames, Quench them with your own blood! Prove that you can. Don't just stand there, don't let it happen! Our town is burning!"



Transcribed lyrics for the folksong "Eli, Eli" (**) exist in part because this song was adapted by Jacob Koppel Sandler in 1896 for use in a play called "Brokhe, Oder – Der Yidisher Kenig Fun Polyn Oyf Eyn Nakht" ("Brokhe, or – The Jewish King of Poland for a Night"). The version sung in the film differs somewhat from this transcription, however, and is closer to at least one version recorded since 1945. (***)

In the film, both these songs are performed in Yiddish by Gerry Wolff (1920-2005) who, in addition to being a singer, acted in numerous films, including in the East German antifascist classic set in Buchenwald, *Nackt unter Wölfen* (*Naked among Wolves*, Dir. Frank Beyer, 1962). Wolff, whose grandfather was a rabbi, survived the war in England before returning to East Germany; it does not seem that he was a native Yiddish speaker.

S'brent (by Mordechai Gebirtig, 1938)

*s'brent! briderlekh, s'brent!
oy, undzer orem shtetl nebekh brent!
beyze vintn mit yirgozn
raysn, brekhn un tseblozn,
shtarker nokh di vilde flamen,
alts arum shoy n brent!*

*un ir shteyt un kukt azoy zikh
mit farleygte hent.
un ir shteyt un kukt azoy zikh-
undzer shtetl brent!*

*s'brent briderlekh, s'brent!
oy, undzer orem shtetl nebekh brent!
s'hobn shoy n di fayertsungen
s'gantse shtetl ayngeshlungen-
un di beyze vintn hudzhen-
undzer shtetl brent!*

*s'brent! briderlekh, s'brent!
es ken kholile kumen der moment
undzer shtot mit undz tsuzamen
zol oyf ash avek in flamen,
blaybn zol - vi nokh a shlakht,
nor puste, shvartse vent!*

*s'brent! briderlekh, s'brent!
di hilf iz nor in aykh aleyn gevendt!
oyb dos shtetl iz aykh tayer,
nemt di keylim, lesht dos fayer,
lesht mit ayer eygn blut,
bavayzt, az ir dos kent.*

*shteyt nit, brider, ot azoy zikh
mit farleygte hent.
shteyt nit, brider, lesht dos fayer-
undzer shtetl brent!*

It's burning! Brothers, it's burning!
Oh, our poor town is burning!
Angry winds with rage
tear, break and fan the flames.
Ever fiercer the wild flames,
Everything around is burning!

And you just stand there and look
With folded arms.
You just stand and look –
Our town is burning!

It's burning! Brothers, it's burning!
Oh, our poor town is burning!
The tongues of flame have already
Swallowed up the whole town
And the angry winds drone -
Our town is burning!

It's burning! Brothers, it's burning!
God forbid, the moment could come
When our town, along with us,
Will turn to ash in the flames.
There will remain, as after a battle,
Only empty, black walls!

It's burning! Brothers, it's burning!
You alone can help!
If the town is dear to you,
Grab your buckets, quench the flames,
Quench them with your own blood,
Prove that you can.

Don't just stand there, brothers,
With folded arms.
Don't just stand there, quench the fire –
Our town is burning!

Eli, Eli (traditional)

*Eli, Eli! Lomo asavtoni?
Mit fayer un flam hot men undz gebrent,
Iberal hot men undz gemakht tsu shand un shpot.
Optsutreten fun undz hot dokh keyner nit gekent,
Fun dayn heyliger toyre, fun deyn gebot.*

*Eli, Eli! Lomo asavtoni?
Tog un nakht nor ikh trakht un bet,
Ikh hit mit moyre undzre toyre,
Un ikh bet: Rete mikh, rete mikh fun gefar
Vi a mol di oves funem beyzn gzar
Far undzre ovos, ovos ovoseynu!
Her tsu mayn gebet un mayn geveyn,
Vayl helfn kenstu, nor Got aleyn,
"Shma yisroel, Adonoy Eloheynu, Adonoy ekhod!"*

My God, my God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?
With fire and flame they have burned us,
Everywhere they have derided and mocked us,
But none of us could turn away
From thy holy Torah, from thy law.

My God, my God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?
Day and night I only think and plead,
In fear I keep our Torah.
And I beg: Save me, save me from danger,
As you once saved from the evil decree
Our Fathers and our Fathers' Fathers!
Listen to my prayer and lamentation.
For only Thou canst help – Thou, God, alone.
"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One."

(*) There are, in fact, other feature films that include original dialogue in Ladino. See, for example, *Every Time We Say Goodbye* (1986) and *Novia Que Te Vea* (Like a Bride, 1994).

(**) Another, very well-known song commonly called "Eli, Eli" does not appear in Stars. Its Hebrew lyrics are from the poem "Halikha LeKeisaria" ("A Walk to Caesarea") by the Hungarian Jewish poet and playwright Hannah Szenes, who immigrated to Palestine in 1939. During the War, Szenes became a paratrooper with the British Army and parachuted into Yugoslavia, in an attempt to cross into Hungary and contact partisan forces to help the Jewish communities there; she was caught and tortured, then finally executed in October 1944. After the war, the Israeli composer David Zehavi set Szenes' poem to music: "My God, my God, may these things never end: the sand and the sea, the rustle of the water, the lightening in the sky, the prayer of man."

(***) See, for example, Perry Como's 1953 album "I Believe – and Songs of All Faiths."

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