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פלקנס "ליאם רוזישט וואסה". ווינוסט ואמאנד
1957
TRADER ED
and other stories
of the Canadian North
and the Old Country

by

E. HANSON

1957
Translator’s Introduction

The following translation is of two Yiddish stories, “Lobo the Wolf” and “Lobo’s Encounter with a Human,” the first two parts of a six-story cycle centred on the character Lobo, who is indeed a wolf. The original stories can be found in Elhonen Hanson’s (1888–1956) short story collection, *Treyder Ed un dertseylungen fun kanades vayn tsedek un fun der alter heym* (*Trader Ed, and Other Stories of the Canadian North and the Old Country*), published by Dos jiddishe vort farlag in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1957. The book is a posthumous collection of works Hanson originally published in Yiddish newspapers during his lifetime, including in *Dos jiddishe vort* (Winnipeg), *Kanader ogler* (Montreal), *Forverts* (New York), and *Di tsukunft* (New York), which in 1945, paid Hanson fifty dollars to publish his most famous story, “Trader Ed,” the same story that gives its name to the title of his book.¹ These translations came from my year as a Translation Fellow at the Yiddish Book Center, during which I began a project of translating all the Canadian stories in Hanson’s collection. I plan to continue this project and publish these translations along with a scholarly introduction in the future.

Elhonen Hanson is an interesting personality in Canadian Jewish history and North American Jewish history generally. Born in 1889 in Chernihiv, Ukraine, then part of the Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire, he moved to western Canada, likely Alberta, with some siblings in 1906. Hanson and his relatives claimed homesteads, and while attempting to develop a farm, he also worked building the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), a position he eventually lost after organizing a failed strike. After several catastrophes, maintaining the homestead became too difficult and he abandoned the venture to settle in Edmonton, Alberta. At some point, Hanson worked as a fur trader, a business he eventually passed on to his nephew. Hanson also worked as a lumber merchant and grocer. After settling in Edmonton, he helped establish several Jewish institutions, including the I.L. Peretz School, which his children attended, and local branches of the Zionist organization Poalei Zion and the socialist Arbeter Ring.² Hanson and his nephew’s involvement with the fur trade played a role in introducing modern trade and Western economic systems to Indigenous peoples.³ Through his work on the CPR, homesteading, and eventual settlement in Edmonton, Hanson participated in Canadian colonial projects, while simultaneously challenging the Canadian national ideal through his Jewishness.⁴ Similarly, his short stories engage with and helped circulate Western, colonial themes in Yiddish while also creating distinctly Jewish Canadian stories.

All the stories in *Trader Ed* are based on Hanson’s and his relatives’ lived experiences. The book is divided into four sections. The first two, which comprise more than half of the material, are about Jewish traders and homesteaders in northern Canada, mostly in Alberta and Saskatchewan. The third and fourth sections are about Jewish
life in the Pale of Settlement. Hanson's writings about life in Canada, especially his fur trading stories, which fit neatly into the adventure genre, captured the imagination of his readers and make him stand out as an author. Trader Ed is an important piece of Yiddish and Canadian cultural and literary history. His semi-autobiographical Canadian stories provide insight into the experiences of those Jewish migrants who actively participated in the colonization of the Americas, building European-style settlements and engaging with Indigenous peoples. The multiple publications of Hanson's work demonstrates that his writings captured his audience's imagination, reflecting and influencing ideas of Jewish lives on the frontiers of North America.

The translations below from the Lobo story cycle reveal some of the themes that make Hanson's writing so compelling. Early on, one is struck by the extremely local but simultaneously international character of the stories. Hanson makes clear Canadian references by setting both stories in the Barren Lands (located in present-day Nunavut and Northwest Territories) and depicting caribou, which he identifies as “an American deer.” He names his main character Lobo, which likely comes from the Spanish word for wolf, suggesting encounters with Spanish-speaking immigrants in Canada and the multicultural character of the frontier. Alongside these local elements, the stories also have an international flavour. The cycle is strongly reminiscent of Jack London's American novels (partially set in Canada), Call of the Wild (1903) and White Fang (1906), books in the then-popular dog stories genre. Indeed, Call of the Wild was popular enough to be translated into Yiddish by M. Olgin in 1919, and Hanson may have read it in either Yiddish or English. At the same time, Hanson wrote in Yiddish, an international language with the majority of its readership outside of Canada, participating in this global literary world.

In these stories, Hanson makes use of the themes of wild nature and empty or uninhabited land, which were so important for European colonial projects. The violent aspect characteristic of Western representations of American nature is particularly pronounced in these stories. Hanson also turns the Canadian landscape into a masculine space: both his animal protagonist Lobo and his human character Trader Ed are male. These themes, along with that of the solitary white man struggling against nature, which begins in the second story of the cycle, are typical elements of colonial literature about North America. To be sure, the appearance of these stories in Yiddish was anything but typical.

Recognising, reading, and engaging with Hanson's stories opens up an under-explored chapter in Jewish history in Canada. Actively reading and analyzing these stories is also an important step in addressing some of the ways Jews engaged in colonial practices, such as erasing Indigenous sovereignty, and in moving toward reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples who were, and are, affected by them.
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Vardit Lightstone / Selections from Elhonen Hanson’s *Trader Ed, and Other Stories*, “Lobo the Wolf” and “Lobo’s Encounter with a Human”
Vardit Lightstone / Selections from Elhonen Hanson’s *Trader Ed, and Other Stories*, “Lobo the Wolf” and “Lobo’s Encounter with a Human”
“Lobo the Wolf”

Lobo the wolf is a veteran of the Barren Lands, wilderness of the Far North. The tears in his ears and deep slashes across his face are proof of many deadly battles. There are plenty of reasons for combat in the wild North, most of all for a creature with a strong bloodlust like Lobo's.

In a lupine society everything is a fight. Not infrequently until death, often for no more than a hollow bone. But it just so happens that a hollow bone is an investment, something to trick a gnawing, empty belly. In the animal kingdom there are a lot of enemies, bigger and stronger, from which bones must be kept hidden. Most combats, though, are between members of the same species and particularly over a female in heat. Lobo has never surrendered the female to another in his pack. More than once, he has nearly paid with his life.

The combat for leadership is the most important of all. He was always seeking to be the leader of the pack. It is not an easy matter in this world of tooth and claw. Scarcely had he joined a pack, then immediately a life and death fight broke out between him and the previous leader.

Usually, Lobo would come out the conqueror, his savagery and bloodthirstiness, multiplied by his nimble strength, always stood by him. He couldn't come out of such a battle completely clean, obviously. For days and even weeks afterward he would need to lick his wounds until they healed.

The caribou (an American deer) is a tasty meal for Lobo in the Barren Lands. When they, the deer, head out on their way to search for new territories, they wander in enormous herds which at times number into the tens of thousands. They cut through the Barren Lands, and then it's Lobo's holiday, no food looked so good.

The caribou is not a large deer and not an animal that offers much resistance. Yet, Lobo found it necessary to organize his pack to attack the herd. Experience taught him that in the face of danger the mild, skittish caribou turn into a dangerous adversary. More than once, Lobo got a taste of their branched antlers in his gaunt sides. When forced, the caribou forget danger and fight like heroes.

The pack generally attacks the herd of deer from all sides, and Lobo attacks the last of them until he separates him from the herd. At that moment, the caribou is surrounded by the other wolves and becomes cut off from the herd, which continues on its way. The devils with burning eyes and steely teeth attack the caribou with a truly wild ferocity, tearing him to pieces, especially trying to cut the leg muscles, so that their victim can't run away. The caribou struggles, instinctively looking for a
strategic point to protect himself from the rear, a boulder, a tree... But what use is it? He stands with his front feet planted in the snow, his head bent low with antlers forward. The battle flares up. The caribou is bloody from many wounds. He is exhausted, no longer moving with such dexterity. Lobo takes advantage of a good moment, suddenly springing on the exhausted stag with a wild roar, he sinks his gleaming teeth into his neck and throws him down into the snow. The stag writhes and squirms, helpless, but Lobo's sharp teeth sink even deeper. A stream of steaming hot blood sprays out as if from a fountain, painting the snow rose-red. The throat torn apart, Lobo thirstily drinks the boiling blood. The stag's shaking passes with a shudder and a twitch. The gentle, fear filled eyes become glazed over, and yet, even before the spark of life is completely snuffed out, the entire pack is on him, tearing him to pieces.

A handful of minutes later, Lobo and his pack lick their bloodied mouths. Only a few remnants are left of what was at first a beautiful, graceful creature, a caribou. Only the branching antlers with the hooves and a collection of teeth remain. That is the cruel primal law of the battle to exist here.

Deep winter. There aren't any more caribou, and there haven't been for a long time. Lobo feels the agony of hunger. The tasty, juicy feasts of the past aren't filling now. He searches, rummages around, but the Barren Lands are very stingy (that's why they're called the Barren Lands). Lobo isn't fussy, good food is what you make it, it could be just a rabbit. But even that is extremely rare in these places and his stomach is a terrible complainer. It allows no true rest. It drives, impels, it pesters mercilessly. His pack fell apart long ago. Since there was no prey, they attacked each other. When one of them fell he was saved from ever standing up again. In a blink, no trace remained, because wolves are cannibals. The survivors scattered to search for their own means of subsistence. Each for themselves.

Weary, Lobo lies in his den, exhausted, starved. There's an upheaval outside. A blizzard rages across the wild breadth of the Barren Lands for the second day already. Differentiating between day and night is hard. The wind howls and spins in a demon-dance, chasing heavy snow clouds, filling the air with sharp needles. The freeze deepens, it's hard to catch a breath.

It's very calm in the den. Dry moss and grass padding shield against the penetrating wind. Lobo lies twisted up like a bagel, his feet and muzzle together, covered by his warm, furry tail. He catches some sleep, but not for long. The hunger gnaws like hordes of rats were chewing and tearing in his gut. And what's new about that? Day and night, even before the blizzard, he ran around, driven by his wicked hunger. He springs up with a suppressed, lamenting howl. Again, the same agonizing convulsions... The time stretches on without end. When will the storm subside already?
Finally, it begins to quieten and the deafening howling and whistling of the wind dies down bit by bit.

It’s night in the Barren Lands. The sky is blue–black, strewn with a million twinkling stars. The frost burns like a hellish fire. The edge of the horizon lies sunken under a deep mantle of snow, reflecting a glare from the twinkling stars.

Lobo comes out of his den. His sides sunken, thin as a rail, and his eyes feverish, shining with an eerie fire. On the edge of a bare boulder with his head raised proudly to the star–studded sky, he has a fit, exulting in a howl.
Selections from Elhonen Hanson’s *Trader Ed, and Other Stories*, “Lobo the Wolf” and “Lobo’s Encounter with a Human”
Vardit Lightstone / Selections from Elhonen Hanson’s Trader Ed, and Other Stories, “Lobo the Wolf” and “Lobo’s Encounter with a Human”
“Lobo’s Encounter with a Human”

Spurred by his gnawing hunger, Lobo chased across the endless space of the frozen Barren Lands. Day after day passed, nothing entered his languishing mouth other than a lick of snow. No matter how far his eyes searched in all directions, a dead-white waste spread out, adorned by a cracking frost. The days—if they can be called days—were very short.

The aurora borealis, or as it is better known in everyday speech, the Northern Lights, fulfilled the role of the sun to some degree. Though it didn't shine as bright a light as the sun, it compensated in other respects, with its dull silvery glow. If Lobo had a sense of natural wonder, he certainly would not have overlooked this grandiose natural performance on the dreadful Barren Lands stage. It is like a richly coloured curtain covering a large part of the dark sky. A playful symphony of colours, like sun beams playing in a waterfall, as the sun sets.

Lobo is hungry. He couldn't care less about the wondrous natural performance. He stands on a high boulder, his head reaching to the star covered sky and is convulsed by a drawn out, lamenting howl. He maintained it alone for a long time. It was simultaneously an outpouring of the terrible hunger pains and also a call to his own kind, a hunting call of ancient ferocity, amplified by hunger. His call was finally heard. From the far distance, by the edge of the horizon could be heard thin voices stretched long. An answer to the call of the leader.

Grey silhouettes slunk like specters from an unreal world, appearing from different directions pacing noiselessly through the dry snow. Their eyes, red-hot like burning coals, flashing in the darkness of the night. Emaciated and therefore full of pulsing energy, ready to attack anything no matter what or who, they circled around their leader.

Lobo stood on the high boulder attempting to smell something with his sharp sense, inhaling the air from all sides with his flared nostrils, at the same time listening with perked ears. But more through instinct than through his senses, he turned in a certain direction, with the pack in a long line behind him. Hour after hour, without a rest, they pressed on with a leaping gallop, mile after mile were consumed underneath them. The ancient instinct self-preservation compelled them from their
long-standing Barren Lands fortress, their hunting territory of many years, to look for sustenance somewhere different.

One day passed, and then another. Lobo maintained the momentum. On the third day, he suddenly stopped mid-gallop as if frozen, straining all his senses. He did catch something, but a completely unfamiliar trail, something such that he had never sensed before, and he remained standing undecided. He knew how to differentiate the smells of different animals, he really needed to know this, because every different case requires a completely different strategy of attack. But then... what does it amount to who is behind the unknown smell?

That landscape ended. Stands of trees appeared here and there, enveloped in white like kits, religious robes. Lobo smelled the unfamiliar sent more sharply. Soon after, he also smelled a food-scent. His empty belly began to cramp agonizingly, and it drove him even faster. Suddenly, Lobo stopped again and for a while even forgot his hunger.

His sharp eyes saw something in the trees up ahead. Something shone with an unfamiliar light. In the light stood an unfamiliar creature on two feet, now straight, now bent. And remarkably, not knowing what sort of a creature it was, he felt a strong awe of it. The gnawing hunger was constant, eagerly tiring him. The wind blew in his direction and a strong smell of food reached his nose, causing sharp hunger pains. He slunk closer to the stand of trees, stretched out on the snow, and it was as if he became frozen in observation. Other than the two-footed, there were also four-footed, very similar to his own type. But they travelled differently, with a different scent, with a language different from his. He witnessed as the two-footed divided food between the four-footed, who happily yapped at that and swallowed it in the blink of an eye. Lobo's mouth began to water watching this. With great effort he stopped himself from stealing the food from the four-footed. Later, the two-footed gathered the four-footed and they went on their way.

Lobo with his pack ran up to the abandoned place, intending to find something to eat, but in the blink of an eye he jumped back with a howling cry. He had stepped in glowing embers, and it gave him a sharp burn on his feet. And others from his pack had the same fate, and with a howling cry they all retreated, licking their wounded feet. The two-footed had left a fire behind. They didn't find anything to eat, but the sharp hunger, added to by curiosity, drove Lobo with his pack to follow the two-footed, to see the unfamiliar dangers. A whole day, until late at night, they followed from a distance, until he had stopped again.

Trader Ed, a trapper of animals, had, after a long hard day, decided to make camp before night. He tied his dogs at a grove, gathered fallen branches and laid a fire. He
melted snow and boiled a pot of coffee for himself, with a little dried meat to eat. For his dogs, he warmed up frozen fish, each one got a two or three pounder. The hounds almost gulped them down without chewing.

Lobo crawled close to the camp and kept a sharp eye on everything that happened. He noticed how one dog escaped his leash and went deeper into the stand of trees. Without losing any time, Lobo went slinking after him. With a single leap he was on his close cousin, a crack with teeth of steel and the dog was left lying with a broken neck and without making a peep. Lobo dragged it deeper into the trees and in a short time no sign remained of the hound. That only provoked the pack’s hunger to a higher degree. Their eyes burnt wildly while licking their bloodied mouths, they were ready to attack Ed and his dogs. But instinct warned Lobo: “Watch out for the two-foot! Be careful!”

The smell of frying bacon, which Trader Ed was preparing for himself, with the dried meat, sharpened their hunger pains so much, that ignoring Lobo’s warning, the pack suddenly jumped on the dogs with wild roars.

Chaos broke out instantly. A struggle, a rattle, a roar, gleaming white teeth snapped like steel traps, hides were ripped open, throats torn, legs bitten, steaming blood painted the snow. The flickering flames from Trader Ed’s campfire dotted with sparks, throwing a dark red glare mixed with shadows on the hellish picture. Unexpectedly, in the middle of this chaos, there was lightning and thunder. K-R-R-A-K! The dark night and the secretive stand of trees were shocked, and before the echo seemed to reverberate, it thundered a number of times, one after the other. Lobo suddenly felt a terrible thrust, an unbearable burn in his shoulder, which threw him to the ground unbelievably fast, flung him through the trees outside the illuminated area and a dark void swallowed him.

A while later, Lobo came around somewhat, opened his hazy, feverish eyes, and tried to figure out the significance of the event. The truth was that thunder and lighting always instilled fear in him, as with the other animals, but never before had he encountered it like now. When his fevered eyes had somewhat cleared, the riddle became clear to him.

The two-footed was standing by a thick enclosure, not far from the fire, holding a long, shiny stick which thundered and spat fire. And wonder of wonders! He saw how a member of his pack, who was quite far from the two-footed, wrestling with a four-footed, met with thunder, with a horrible howl sprang away and fell down on the snow never moving from the spot again. He also noticed that all the others in his pack were lying scattered as though frozen in the weak glow of the fire. So it became clear to him that the two-footed with the thunderous stick was a dangerous
thing and he must hide from it. He lay shaking, dying, barely drawing a breath. From extreme fear he once again sank into a dark abyss...

Trader Ed considered the destruction the wolves had caused in his camp. His surviving dogs gathered around him with heart-rending howls. Battered, bloody, they licked their wounds. He noticed that he was missing one dog. He received no response to his call. A second hound lay with a torn throat, he couldn't even lift himself up. Trader Ed freed him from his agony with a bullet in the head. He did what he could to heal the remaining dogs, he laid a strong fire and the hounds didn't leave the fire light, for security.

When Lobo came to himself again and looked around from his hiding place, the two-footed was no longer there with his thunder-stick, and also no four-footeds and no fiery light. It was silent as the grave, the stars winked high above the forest. His wounds stung. His entire body felt like it was made of lead, his tongue was so dry, he couldn't give his wounds even a single lick. He greedily swallowed the snow. That reduced his fever somewhat. When he attempted to lift himself, a sharp pain went through his entire body and he remained lying, unable to move from the spot.

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2. For more on Elhonen Hanson’s biography, see Elhonen Hanson Autobiography, 1942, RG 102, #65, American-Jewish Autobiographies, YIVO Archives, New York. See also, Vardit Lightstone, “Performing Migrant Identity: Canadian Yiddish Personal Narratives” (PhD diss., University of Toronto and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2022), 254.
4. For a discussion of ways Jews from this period, including Hanson, express their participation in Canadian culture and challenge it, see Lightstone, “Performing Migrant Identity,” 195-242.
5. In the book, his name is written “אָבאל,” which would be more correctly transliterated as “Labo.” This word is so close to the Spanish “Lobo” meaning wolf, that it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this was Hanson’s intention. Whether the mistake is Hanson’s or the book’s editor or typesetter, I have not been able to discern at this point. Elhonen Hanson, Treyder Ed un undere dertseylungen fun kanades vaytn tsofn un fun der alter heym (Winnipeg: Dos Yidishe Vort, 1957), 39.