

The Miser's House

On a path choked with weeds,
Along walls hunched with shame,
His hands too numb for giving,
Dwells the miser of the land.

Once a year, on the Sabbath of Songs,
Crumbs he casts upon the street.
Birds sharpen their beaks,
To peck? God forbid!

In our book, creased with age,
There 'tis writ, no bird will eat,
From a miser's ruling hand.

Long ago the book was lost
And the miser's in his grave,
Arching wide across the land,
This house the birds avoid.

Bluestein read this poem, singing it with every part of his body, and ending with motions of flying. They all applauded him, and Miriam Ulinover said, "When you read my poems, Comrade Bluestein, I understand them better."

"Thanks very much, Comrade Ulinover," Bluestein answered. He felt good, uplifted by these poems. He thought, "Like an antique spice-box, or other Jewish treasure, this book should be found in every Jewish home. In this book a phrase of Jewish life is immortalized, the life of our holy men. This book can give us strength to remain Jews."

Bluestein read this poem, singing it with every part of his body.

That Bluestein was pleased with Miriam Ulinover's compliment could be seen from the expression on his face. She insisted that he read at least one of his poems, otherwise her feelings would be hurt.

Branches

It happens: Someone driven by fury

Breaks off branches from a tree
And casts them to the ground.
Thus did they break away
Our children from their mother's arms,
Hurl them to the ground,
And smash them!
It happens: Someone picks them up
A broken branch,
Carries it around,
And weeps over it,
Who can pick up our children,
And weep over them?
No one, no one, no one.

Bluestein was choked with tears. Miriam Ulinover's eyes were filled with tears. Alter Schnur and Zlate were weeping quietly. The poem recalled to them their own children whom the Germans seized in the "Shperre", and when it got dark they took their leave of Miriam Ulinover. She accompanied them to the stairs, with a prayer, "With God's help, may you come to me soon with the news that the war is over." It echoed throughout the stairwell.

* * * *

During the liquidation of the ghetto in August, 1944, after being chased all day by the S.S. and the Criminal Police, Bluestein came to Miriam Ulinover's house to find out how things were with her. He found only her older daughter, weeping loudly, holding her five-year-old boy in her arms. She cried because she could not go with her mother, and she said over and over again, "Tomorrow, early in the morning, I'll report voluntarily, with my child. Maybe I'll still find her, my dear mother."

The next morning she reported for deportation, with her child.

(Translated from the Yiddish
by Rebecca Soyer)

BOOKS

THE YIDDISH VIEW OF THE WORLD

ISIDORE HAIBLUM

IN PRAISE OF YIDDISH, by MAURICE SAMUEL, Cowles, 283 pages.

The modern Jew, unlike his ancestors, can no longer be encompassed in a phrase, having run out of definitions long ago. But, for better or worse, a man's Jewishness will shape his life in an irrevocable manner.

Since all people belong *somewhere*, a man who happens to be Jewish must belong somewhere too; but often, if he has mislaid his tradition, neglected his heritage or failed to educate himself in the ways of history, he will find, with bitterness, dismay and wonder, that he belongs nowhere.

Such a condition is indeed a frightful affliction for a man to bear, and it is therefore a good thing that remedies abound in such profusion. For Judaism is no pauper in the field of belief and culture. And a man can take his pick.

He could do worse than to choose Yiddish. For there is something magical about this language and culture; with its persistent staying power, its uncommon achievements, it keep confounding its critics.

About its literature, only one aspect of this magic, Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg have written in their introduction to *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*:

"The decay of the religious community, the Enlightenment, the rise of individualism, the turn to bohemianism, the challenge of radical ideologies, the burden of alienation, the new appetite for cultural affirmation—all this, and more,

which comprises the history of the modern intellect and is so sharply refracted in modern writing, has been pressed into the brief life of Yiddish literature." It is something to conjure with, is it not?

Beginnings of Yiddish

The story of Yiddish goes far back some ten—eleven hundred years. At one time it was thought to be only five hundred and then seven hundred and now the boundaries have been pushed back even further. The scholars have kept digging and who can say what they will turn up next? More and more *mame-loshn* is capturing the imagination, interest and admiration of new generations who have—only at best—a fleeting acquaintance with it. This is something of a marvel. Yiddish has been written off so often as to acquire the most modern psychic complexes: Isaac Bashevis Singer tells us "... twenty-five or even thirty-five years ago they said the Yiddish press would only last another five years. One of the great pessimists then was Abraham Cahan who helped build the *Forward*. He said that the first generation of Jews in this country would speak Yiddish, but the second generation would not. It was so, but somehow the Yiddish press goes on living. It's like the Jews generally. They die all the time and they keep on living all the time."¹

True enough. Only five years ago there were as few as three or four colleges in the United States offering Yiddish studies. Today, somewhat miraculously, on the heels of the Black studies explosion, Yid-

¹ From a *Commentary* interview by J. Blocker and R. Elman reprinted in *Critical Views of I. B. Singer*. I. Malin, ed.

dish can be found in over *forty* colleges. It is even possible to *major* in Yiddish: Queens College offers twenty courses leading to B.A. in Yiddish language and literature.

Its site of inception was the basin of the Moselle and the Left Bank of the Rhine. The Jews called this territory *Loter* and it was here, sometime in the ninth century, that a handful of them emanating from (what was later to become) France and Italy determined to settle. They brought along the Jewish correlates of Old French and Old Italian—Western and Southern *Laaz*—and their time-honored companion, Hebrew-Aramaic, merging these with the local German dialects. A *fusion* of existing linguistic stock resulted, but something *entirely new and quite extraordinary* came into being: the Yiddish language.

A Guided Tour Through the Language

In the thirteenth century as these Ashkenazic Jews—under the growing impetus of the Crusades—began their move eastward, the Slavic component was added to Yiddish. The ubiquitous *nebekh* is, incidentally, the first word of Slavic origin to appear in a Yiddish manuscript (and it has now found its way into English dictionaries, as well). By the fifteenth century the Jewish population centers had shifted from Western to Eastern Europe and the name *Yiddish* designating the language proper began to appear in Yiddish texts. That there are written records of almost all the stages of this language is a testament to the obstinacy of Jewish literacy and a very special blessing for scholars. It assures untold surprises. For Yiddish, being a tongue bereft of a territory is *absolutely unique*. There are startling rewards here for the learned professions—rewards which are only now coming to be fully understood and appreciated—for clearly, a language that

has traveled among and interacted with so many diverse cultures must have a good deal to tell us about language and culture in general, as well as about the Jewish people in particular.

Samuel's Way With Words

Maurice Samuel's twenty-fifth book is called *In Praise of Yiddish*, and those who wish a guided tour through the Yiddish language, its antecedents and etymology, need look no further. There never has been a book quite like this in English. It is a volume teeming with erudition, wit and love for its subject. It is simply a delight to browse through, or to read, as I have done, from cover to cover. Mr. Samuel's aim has been to capture the "spirit" of Yiddish and to convey that spirit to an English audience; he has succeeded admirably.

In all there are 16 chapters ranging from Chapter One, *The Character of Yiddish*: "More particularly, Yiddish is a mirror of the total Jewish condition of the last two thousand years . . ." to Chapter Sixteen, *The Future of Yiddish*: "All over the country, small groups of Jews have been impelled to take up the study of Yiddish . . ." In between, investigations of the Germanic, Hebraic and Slavic components of Yiddish, its idioms and neologisms, proverbs and maledictions abound.

In Praise of Yiddish is a book about words. But it is also about literature; see: *The At-Homeness of Tevye*, Chapter Twelve; it is about people, customs, religion and history; it is about joy and sorrow. And about the Yiddish view of the world.

An example of Mr. Samuel's way with words, things Jewish and Yiddish follows; a virtuoso performance, it indicates the volume's scope:

"I must pause for a moment over *hefker* (Heb). It has no equivalent word in English; it is fairly near the German

vogelfrei, 'outside the protection of the law, any man's game or property.' There is a story concerning a saintly rabbi who was seated early one morning at his window, deep in study. Suddenly he heard a noise in the yard, and saw a thief making off with some of the firewood. Thereupon he threw open the window and called out, '*hefker!*', thereby declaring the wood to be no one's and everyone's property. His concern was that the thief should not be committing a sin for the sake of his, the rabbi's, property. The common phrase *a velt iz nit hefker* is an outcry against a particular odious act of injustice: 'There's still some law in the world.' Balancing it, there is the humorous phrase, applied when someone is trying to put over an unusually imprudent trick, *hefker tsibele*, 'onions', or *hefker petreshke*, 'parsley,' well translated by Weinreich as 'everything goes.'

Another Book, Please!

Could we ask for more? Yes and no. Not in this volume perhaps, but in future volumes. Why not another by Mr. Samuel himself?

For he is very strong here on the Hebrew component in Yiddish—being an ardent Hebrewist—and a good portion of the book is given over to its exposition. For one reader, at least, it is something of a revelation. Coming from a non-religious home—but one with the strongest ties to secular Yiddish tradition—many of the words and phrases that Mr. Samuel cites seem to have been happily provided especially for me. And warm thanks are in order and offered. But as the author himself has pointed out at the conclusion of *The Shtetl and Slavic*, "The Slavic influence on Yiddish goes far beyond what is suggested in this chapter . . ."

And the same may also be said of the Germanic components; in Yiddish

these predominate numerically. (Estimates vary, but 85 to 90 per cent seems close enough.) But the author's heart—most obviously—lies in a different direction. And for this he cannot be legitimately faulted. It is all, in the end, a matter of taste...

In Praise of Yiddish generates innumerable sparks, suggest a profusion of ideas: one such presents itself: relatively few Yiddish authors are alluded to in these pages and one must yearn for a book delineating Yiddish prose and poetry styles, illustrating how these very words which Maurice Samuel has so lovingly compiled are used by various Yiddish writers—combined and manipulated on the highest artistic level—to achieve such stunningly diverse stylistic effects. Yes, that would be quite another book, of course. And one that Mr. Samuel would be eminently qualified to write, being one of the finest translators from the Yiddish that we possess.

Yugent-ruf? A group of young people referred to by Mr. Samuel. Their aim is the renewal of the Yiddish language, its daily use and updating. Mr. Samuel questions their style. This writer cannot call himself a member of *yugent-ruf* being, alas, too old. He is, however, an admirer. And feels compelled to add:

Yugent-ruf is a *student group*. They try. They learn. They experiment. It is no simple task to master Yiddish in an English-saturated environment. If more adults took pains to speak to these young people in *Yiddish*, their progress would be far swifter. And the future of Yiddish continuity considerable brighter.

But it is brighter these days, in any case, now that Maurice Samuel has given us *In Praise of Yiddish*. Scores of new friends will surely be won for *mameloshn*. And old friends who read this volume will rejoice. It is simply that kind of a book: an invaluable one.