

THE RECEPTION OF I.B. SINGER'S FICTION IN POLAND

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The reception of I.B. Singer's works in Poland is an especially interesting and complex phenomenon, more interesting than his reception in any other country, perhaps with the exception of Israel¹. Dan Miron states that Israeli and Zionist readership is likely to be "uncomfortable and not as accepting" of Bashevis as "that of the "Goyim"². Polish "Goyim", however, differ in their reading from other ones. Singer occupies a special place among Polish readers and critics not only due to his strong connections with Poland but also due to the complicated history of Polish-Jewish relations. Various ways of perceiving him and his work constitute to some extent a litmus test on Poles' attitude towards Jews and Jewish culture, and sometimes reveal different political and ideological orientations.

We can distinguish three stages of Singer's reception in Poland:

- 1) before 1978 when he was practically unknown in Poland;
- 2) 1978-1989 when due to his receiving the Nobel Prize some of his works were published, but only those that did not contain any critical opinions concerning Communism and the Soviet Union;
- 3) after 1989 when most of his works have appeared but when publishers' pursuit for a quick profit has often hampered the quality of translation.

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²D. Miron, Passivity and Narration: The Spell of Isaac Bashevis Singer, Judaism, No. 4, 1992, p. 17.

Reception is a multifold issue as the reception of Singer's fiction in Poland certainly proves. It comprises various factors, e.g. evaluation of the writer's work by Polish critics in the country and in exile, the quality of the Polish translations, including such aspects as rendering words and expressions connected with Jewish and Polish culture and the paradoxes arising from the fact that Singer's works reach the Polish reader via the English language instead of Yiddish, traces of the influence of his life and work upon some Polish writers (the best example in this case is J.M. Rymkiewicz's novel Umschlagplatz where one of the main characters is based on the writer), stage adaptations of Singer's works in Poland and their reception, sale of his books, presence of his books on bestseller lists, popularity among readers, other events celebrating the writer like public lectures, seminars, exhibitions, commemorative plaques, etc. In this paper I will focus mainly on the opinions of critics as the most meaningful and informative source.

Not only presence but also absence of a writer can be meaningful in examining reception, especially if it is a well-known writer who is well-received in other countries. It seems that the main reason for Singer's absence in Poland until 1978 was the censorship imposed on Jewish topics after the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968. It is enough to mention that some books concerning Jewish literature and culture prepared for publication in the late sixties had to wait more than ten years for their publication. Even if the censorship would have allowed the publication of some of his stories in journals, most editors had a strong sense of self-censorship and rejected them to be on the safe side. Therefore the only pre-Nobel publications of his fiction were those in 1977 in Tygodnik Powszechny (No. 5), a semi-dissident weekly, and in Odgłosy (No. 1), a local Lodz paper, both with relatively small circulation.

I experienced the censorship in action myself in 1977 when I translated two of Singer's stories and offered them to several literary journals. Most editors without giving any reasons answered that they were not interested in Singer's work, and one editor informed me half-jokingly that Singer was a treyf author. One of the proofs that Singer's absence in post-war Poland was political rather than coincidental is the presence of Singer in the Polish emigre press, especially in London. As early as 1966, a long and fairly profound article on Singer

appeared³, followed by other publications⁴, and when the writer received the Nobel Prize, a London Polish weekly welcomed him with an epigram entitled "To My Outstanding Countryman Isaac Bashevis-Singer"⁵.

Polish media in Poland, on the other hand, were completely surprised and unprepared. In the first information about the 1978 Nobel Prize it was stated that a completely unknown writer had become the laureate. The main Communist Party organ Trybuna Ludu informed its readers that Singer was the author of a story entitled The Partisan Review as well as a collection of seven short stories entitled Shosha, and now he was trying to translate some of his works into English⁶. A couple of months later the main correspondent of the Polish Press Agency admitted that they had made a mistake and that Singer was a widely acclaimed author⁷. In the meantime Singer's stories appeared in various journals (one of them, a monthly Literatura na Świecie, devoted a special issue to the writer in April 1979) but it took five years for the first books to be published. They were The Magician of Lublin, The Manor and The Estate, as well as a collection of stories taken from various editions. They were welcome by a number of reviews in all sorts of newspapers and journals: literary, political, women's magazines. Most of these articles were brief and superficial.

Afterwards six years passed before the next book was published, while in the years 1990-1992 after the abandonment

³See Z. Kozarynowa, Bez nienawiści (Without Hatred), Wiadomości, London 1966, No. 38, p. 2.

⁴See e.g. Z. Kozarynowa, Korzenie twórczości amerykańskiego pisarza (The Roots of an American Writer), Tydzień Polski, London 1970, no. 16, pp. 6-7 and K. Rowinski, Niewolnicy (The Slaves), Tydzień Polski, London 1975, No. 19, p. 12.

⁵See T. Polanowski, Znakomitemu Rodakowi Izaakowi Bashevis-Singerowi, Tydzień Polski, London 1978, No. 42, p. 8.

⁶See W. Łoziński, Rodem z Radzymina (Born at Radzymin), Trybuna Ludu, No. 242, 1978, p. 6.

⁷See E. Boniecka, W świecie Izaaka Singera (In Isaac Singer's World), Sztandar Ludu, No. 274, 1979, p. 6.

of censorship and with a competitive and flourishing publishing industry more than ten books appeared followed by more thorough analyses of Singer's works.

One of the most interesting questions for Polish critics is Singer's connection with Poland, the question of to what extent he belongs to Polish culture, as well as what is his attitude towards Poland, Poles, Polish-Jewish relations, Polish antisemitism etc. These questions appear with varying degrees of intensity in reviews and articles depending on the rank of the critic and sometimes the journal's political orientation. Some opinions sound amusing from the present point of view, like the one in the former Communist Party hard-line weekly Rzeczywistość where Singer's fiction is used as a pretext for some anti-Zionist propaganda⁸.

A number of journalists tend to simplify the issue of Singer's Polish roots and somehow try to appropriate Singer for Polish literature. Such attempts were especially tempting after he received the Nobel Prize. They usually mention the fact that Singer spent the first thirty years of his life in Poland, focus on Singer's knowledge of Polish, his detailed descriptions of Warsaw and other Polish cities and towns, his apparent similarity to some nineteenth century Polish writers like Bolesław Prus and Eliza Orzeszkowa. They illustrate their statements with opinions expressed by the writer himself who mentioned on several occasions that the first thirty years of a writer's life were most important for his creative development and that in fact he had never left Poland spiritually but still lived there. Polish reviewers often are not aware of or overlook the fact that what Singer meant was a pre-war Poland with a large Jewish community.

Singer's critical vision of Poland and its history, the appearance of the stereotypes of Poles, especially of the Polish nobleman and Poles as a group, e.g. peasants and/or soldiers, seem to be an especially sensitive matter for Polish critics. They tackle this issue in various possible ways. Most of them, which is to their merit, stress the fact that Polish characters have to be seen against Singer's whole literary output where lots of characters are presented as extreme types or even caricatures. One critic, while relating his meeting with Singer, does not even want to admit that the problem of

⁸A. Godlewska, Izaak B. Singer, Rzeczywistość, No. 46, 1984.

presenting Polish characters is what intrigues him and he justifies his inquiry by saying that he heard opinions expressed by other people perplexed with this question⁹. Some critics try to show the disparity that existed between the Polish and Jewish communities before the war, among other things the complete separateness between the Polish (including Polish-Jewish writers writing in Polish) and Yiddish literary worlds¹⁰.

There are even voices that present Singer as a writer with extremely favourable views about Poles and Poland. E.g. one reviewer sees The Magician of Lublin as a testimony to Polish tolerance (as the evidence he gives Yasha's friendly contacts with the Christian world)¹¹ and another one claims pompously that Singer with his writing expresses his gratitude towards Poland to which he feels indebted since it was there, in the country of his ancestors where "he could be born and grow up, receive education and prepare his talent to develop"¹².

The other extreme constitute those voices that accuse Singer of ignorance and hatred towards Poland. I would like to focus on two fairly characteristic opinions: by Piotr Kuncewicz, a literary critic living in Poland, the author of the lengthy postscript to the Polish edition of The Slave and by Ksenia Kopystyńska, an emigre journalist living in Canada who calls herself a "specialist" on Singer.

Although Kuncewicz is very ambiguous in what he says, his message is fairly clear: he considers The Slave a lampoon on Poland, points out Singer's ignorance as far as the knowledge of Poland and Poles is concerned, but on the other hand admits that Singer is quite critical of his own community; Kuncewicz states that if he had written one tenth of what Singer wrote

⁹See M. Turski, Wieczór z Singerem (An Evening with Singer), Polityka, No. 27, 1984, s. 11.

¹⁰See e.g. M. Wyka, Czar ulicy Krochmalnej (The Chram of the Krochmalna Street), Dekada Literacka, No. 34, 1991, p. 8.

¹¹See J. Lewandowski, Teżknota za młodością? (Nostalgia for the Young Years?), Tygodnik Kulturalny, No. 43, 1983, p.12.

¹²Z. Laczkowski, Dar bycia w prawdzie (The Gift of Truth), Słowo Powszechne, No. 195, 1983, p. 6.

about Jews he would be marked as an antisemite for ever. In spite of his critical comments he considers The Slave an outstanding albeit a puzzling novel¹³.

Kopystyńska goes much further and while conducting some pseudo-psychoanalytical examination of Singer's supposedly love-hatred relationship with Poland shows at the same time that her own attitude towards Singer is marked by attraction and revulsion, when she says that she draws satisfaction from the fact that without the Poland that he hates Singer would not have become a great writer¹⁴. This simplified reading is important in the sense that it may be fairly common among readers without a literary background and especially those holding some earlier prejudices. For those readers who treat fiction as a document some of Singer's works will be proof of Jewish antipolonism.

Opinions similar to those by Kopystyńska are very infrequent although I heard some similar responses given in private conversations. One of the reasons for such a situation can be the fact that - as one of the critics rightly observed¹⁵ - nowadays in Poland "it is improper" not to like Singer which can be related to a very positive attitude towards Jewish culture bordering on fascination and exaltation especially in academic and literary circles. Therefore some critics prefer to keep silent rather than risk being accused of a veristic reading or intolerance. However, in order to show the polarity of possible readings of Singer's fiction one can contrast Kuncewicz's or Kopystyńska's remarks with a review of The King of the Fields in an elite Cracow journal where the Polish issue is not even touched upon in spite of the fact that this is the most "Polish" among Singer's works. The novel is perceived in exclusively mythical and metaphorical terms¹⁶.

¹³See Posłowie (Postcript), in: I.B. Singer, Niewolnik, tr. by I. Wyrzykowska, Alfa, Warszawa 1991.

¹⁴See K. Kopystyńska, O Singerze słów kilka (A Few Words about Singer), Kulisy Polonii, Edmonton 1991, No. 80, p. 10.

¹⁵See. A. Bojarska, Noblista 1978 (The 1978 Nobel Laureate), Nowe Książki, No. 11, 1983, p. 14.

¹⁶See K. Biedrzycki, Stara baśń o królu pól (An Old Tale of the King of the Fields, NaGłos, No. 5, 1991, pp. 158-163.

It is interesting how sometimes certain stereotypes concerning Jews are revealed in critics' opinions, even those very favourable towards Singer. For instance Kozarynowa in her article full of appreciation for Singer's work claims that "our (Christian) general notion about Jewish mercenariness and selfishness should be reconsidered" and that "we shall never understand the mixture of so many contradictions in the Jewish personality. Mercenary and self-seeking and impulsive and emotional at the same time"¹⁷. Another reviewer states that the protagonist of The Manor is Kalman, "a rich Jew who (...) due to the business acumen so characteristic of his people, appropriates the count's property"¹⁸.

Another characteristic type of reading is of looking at Singer as a representative of a world that is no more, and perceiving him less than a writer but rather a symbol of that world. This type of criticism is marked with nostalgia, pathos, exaltation and direct or indirect willingness to pay tribute to the destroyed Polish Jewry. These opinions tend to idealize Singer as a man and artist. And thus the writer is described as the 'narrator of human passions', 'the last rebbe', 'the last Jewish sage', 'a Candide from Radzymin', 'a magus' and 'a magician', a 'eulogist of the dying language' and a 'witness of the extinct world'.

Another interesting trend that can be observed in recent years is looking at the writer's fiction from the theological point of view. This type of reading has been revealed in two lengthy essays published in the Catholic periodicals advocating ecumenical ideas and dialogue with Judaism¹⁹. What is more, in the religious section of the weekend edition of the largest Polish daily Gazeta Wyborcza the words of one of Singer's characters were once used by a Catholic priest as an

¹⁷Kozarynowa, Bez nienawiści, op. cit.

¹⁸D.T. Lebioda, Którędy uciekać (Which Way to Escape), Fakty, No. 8, 1984, p. 10.

¹⁹See P. Lisicki, Mistrz wątpliwości (A Master of Doubt), Znak, No. 5, 1992, pp. 83-96 and A. Szymańska, W laboratorium ludzkości (In the Laboratory of Mankind), Przegląd Powszechny, No. 7/8, 1992, pp. 117-135.

introduction to his weekly creed²⁰.

As my private observations testify, different modes of reception of Singer's work depend to some extent on the age of the readers. Young people seem to be less sensitive than the older ones to the negative image of Poles and are primarily attracted to the Jewish reality, so exotic for the post-war generation. They are less inclined to deny Polish antisemitism and they try to examine the reasons for the conflicts. Some older readers, on the other hand, tend to read Bashevis' works in a fairly veristic way and the critical depiction of Jewish characters serves them sometimes as a confirmation of their earlier resentments and prejudices. That is what Singer's Jewish critics had in mind when they expressed their criticism of his fiction on the grounds that they could strengthen some stereotypes. This type of reading is common among readers in any country and although generally excluded by serious literary criticism it is worth examining within the framework of socioliterary studies.

It seems that now when most of Singer's works are available in Polish, his writings will inspire more critics and literary scholars. Some of their observations will probably be similar to those already made in other countries, especially in the United States, but others will hopefully enrich the Singer scholarship due to the fact that Polish critics look at the writer from a different perspective. And last but not least, the encounter with Singer's writings is a very illuminating experience for Polish readers. A number of his works concern the very same historical and social reality familiar to Poles from the Polish prose of the nineteenth and twentieth century but seen through the eyes of a representative of a most significant minority. This encounter can be psychologically painful and shocking in places but encourages the reader to reexamine the Polish-Jewish past and present, as well as makes them acquainted with the Jewish culture so little known and fairly exotic for the contemporary generation. For, as one journalist rightly remarked, "after Singer's books appeared in Poland, any portrait of the second half of the nineteenth century excluding his writing would seem incomplete"²¹.

²⁰See R.E. Rogowski, Boski wiatr (God's Wind), No. 13, 1993, p. 19.

²¹K.T. Toeplitz, Polska Izaaka Singera (I.B. Singer's Poland), Polityka, No. 24, 1984, pp. 10-11.