

**Concepts of Space and Society:
Melnits, Berlin and New York
in I. J. Singer's Novel
*Di mishpokhe Karnovski***

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The city in modern Yiddish fiction is often the focus of the conflict between two opposing attitudes: the fascination with, and desire to emulate, that which is modern, secular, and outside the bounds of traditional Jewish life; and the fear that such an attraction will lead to assimilation, conversion and the eventual submergence of Jewish identity. The myth of the city as a place of both enlightenment and corruption, as juxtaposed with the corresponding paradox of the provincial town as the place of innocent purity as well as pernicious ignorance, is especially apparent in the portrayals of the German city in contrast with the shtetl, or small Jewish town.¹ Thus the contrast of the Western cities of Berlin and New York with the Polish shtetl of Melnits in I. J. Singer's novel *Di mishpokhe Karnovski* (The Karnovski family, 1943) was a twentieth-century reflection of a familiar preoccupation of Yiddish literature.

In the nineteenth century, the interest in things German was a hallmark of the Haskole (the Jewish Enlightenment movement in Eastern Europe). While leaders of traditional religious elements generally opposed any Germanizing influence, and suspected that such tendencies would inevitably lead to apostasy, many of the maskilim (adherents of the Haskole) defined their goal to be, precisely, Westernization and modernization of East European Jewry on the German model: education of the individual and reform of Jewish society, with the goal of integration into non-Jewish society as a religious rather than a national group. In their writings, among the earliest works of modern Yiddish literature, these maskilim held up the language, literature and culture of Germany (including modes of dress as well as literary fashions) as the ultimate ideal.

In this context, the German city was presented as the most suitable place for the enlightenment and education of the young heroes of these first examples of modern Yiddish fiction. For instance, Breslau represents such a center of urban edification—a “city of light”—² in Israel Aksenfeld's novel *Dos shterntikhl* (The headdress; published 1861,

written sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century). In this book, which begins with a broadly satiric discussion and definition of the terms *shtot* (town or city) and *shtetl* (small provincial town), Breslau stands in shining contrast to the East European Jewish towns of Loyhoypoli (a fictional name meaning "Nowheresville") and Mezhibuzh (an actual Jewish town in Poland), both of which are described as dirty, noisy and too intimate for comfort. The main attribute of the German city, on the other hand, is its cleanliness and order; and so it is the proper environment for the education and civilization of young Mikhl Belfer, who then returns to "set things straight" (here the reform consists of revealing hidden identities, reuniting long-divided families, etc.) in the less orderly Jewish settlements in Poland. For Aksenfeld, there was no question of the superiority of Western civilization over what he saw as Eastern barbarity.

The journey from *shtetl* to East European Jewish town to German city is also undertaken by Hershele, the protagonist of Sh. Y. Abramovitsh's Bildungsroman *Dos vintshfingerl* (The wishing ring, 1888). In this novel the movement begins in Kabtsansk ("town of beggars"), the prototype of the myth of the *shtetl* as a place of poverty and hunger which cannot continue to support its inhabitants.³ Hershele must leave Kabtsansk in order to survive; and when he comes to Glupsk ("town of fools"), he experiences the material hardships and spiritual alienation usually associated with the provincial figure newly arrived in the urban environment.⁴

Hershele's subsequent experiences in Leipzig, the "city of light" in this novel, are referred to but never described. This is partly because the book remained essentially unfinished; but it is also true that the educational significance of the German city was now obvious enough to be simply invoked. The protagonist's return to his native *shtetl* is, in this novel, treated with more ambivalence than was Mikhl Belfer's homecoming in *Dos shterntikhl*. Abramovitsh tempers the scene of triumphant return with overtones of ridicule and satire directed against the newly Germanified young man: Hershele has come back to a *shtetl* that is in ruins from the pogroms of 1881; here, his liberal education and humanitarian ideas are largely irrelevant.⁵ This somewhat attenuated version of the *shtetl*/city opposition testifies to Abramovitsh's greater literary sophistication, as well as to the growing disillusionment, at the end of the nineteenth century, of many maskilim with the ideals of liberalism and modernity on the model of the German Jewish Enlightenment. The pogroms and political reaction in Russia after the assassination of Alexander II forced a reevaluation of the ideal of integrating the Jews of Eastern Europe into non-Jewish society, following the example of their Western brethren. In addition, the institution of the *shtetl* was already on the decline by this time; as a result, sharp criticism of provincial Jewish life was to some extent replaced by nostalgia and retrospective portrayals of bygone days (in the works of Abramovitsh himself as well as by the more sentimentally inclined twentieth-century writers such as Sholem Asch).⁶

With the first decades of the twentieth century came the dissolution of the *Haskole* (its political energy channelled into various revolutionary and nationalist movements), and the maturing and diversification of Yiddish literature. Urban life was now the norm for a majority of East European Jews; the city was a natural locale for fiction dealing with contemporary life. German culture, and the German city, continued to be important. In the twenties, one of the centers of East European Jewish intelligentsia, and of Yiddish writers, was Berlin. With the émigrés of other nationalities, they had travelled westward to escape the tumult of revolution and civil war that shook Russia in the wake of the First World War. One of the most prominent of these Yiddish writers was the poet Moyshe Kulbak, who (after his return to Kiev in 1923)⁷ wrote a long narrative poem about his Berlin years. Entitled *Disner Tshayld Herold* (This Child Harold, 1933), this work parodies the pilgrimage of a romantic young man from Eastern Europe to Berlin, where he hopes to better himself culturally and intellectually. By describing the hollow trappings and idle ways of self-styled Berlin intelligentsia, Kulbak ridicules the "bourgeois decadence" of the city with his characteristic irony, and adds a dose of party-line political analysis. The only section devoid of ridicule deals with the workers' section of Wedding; the only hope for Germany and the German city, we are told, is in the awakening of its laboring masses. In this poem, the German city has become the symbol of corruption, containing within itself the seed of redemption and the new enlightenment: the raising of class consciousness.⁸

Ten years later, when I. J. Singer's novel *Di mishpokhe Karnovski* first appeared in book form,⁹ Kulbak's naive political analysis had been proven dead wrong: instead of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Hitler and the Nazis were running Germany. Writing in New York in the early forties, Singer presents his version of the changing role of Berlin for the East European Jew: from the locus of ideal civilization, it becomes a nightmare of economic and social persecution. Singer relies on his readers' knowledge of current events in Europe, and points to these events, as well as the development and fate of each character, as ultimate proof of the falsity of the liberal ideals of Enlightenment in the German image.

In this novel, Singer tells a story that was not at all uncommon in the last half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century: that of a Jewish family that migrates from Eastern Europe to Germany, and finally, to America. The events of this novel are thus solidly grounded in historical and demographic fact; but Singer uses this material for his own very specific purposes, selecting details of time and place to illustrate and underline the central thesis of the book. The author contends that the movement westward is a movement away from the source of traditional East European Jewishness, and that the only way for an individual to counteract the weakening effect of this movement is to reaffirm his or her personal commitment to that source—by resuming and reaffirming bonds of family and community. In *Di mishpokhe Karnovski*, we see three generations in which the tendency toward

Westernization, acculturation (and the threat of assimilation and national, cultural obliteration) comes into conflict with the ultimate undeniability of East European Jewish roots.

Singer sets up the dynamics of this conflict around the polar opposition of East and West. The East represents, in this novel, the place of origin, the old home, with its primitivity as well as its vigor; it is identified with the shtetl, and with traditional forms of provincial Jewish life. The West is the new home, the city, the place of civilization, propriety, and a refinement that has overtones of weakness and degeneration. This basically geographical polarity dominates the general movement of the novel (the westward progression, with constant backward glances to the East), and it provides the key to the personalities, as well as the careers, of the protagonists.

While the geographical opposition of East versus West informs every aspect of the novel, the geographical particularities of specific locations are portrayed only to the extent that the details contribute to the development of this opposition, or define the status of the characters within it.¹⁰ The conventional contrast of shtetl and city is employed here to underline and emphasize the conflict of values and norms which the protagonists must confront and resolve. The action of the book takes place in three locales: the Polish shtetl Melnits, the German city of Berlin, and the American urban center, New York City. Melnits is evoked rather than described; the author seems to rely on his readers' assumed familiarity with the typical (or stereotypical) concept of the shtetl, and so he points to, rather than delineates, its atmosphere and attitudes. Melnits is thus given rather short shrift as a place of action; it is, most significantly, the place moved *from*, and subsequently remembered, in other times and places.

Berlin, the city that first stands for Western refinement and culture, is where we see the Karnovskis for the longest span of time, and it is where the main battles of culture and family heritage are fought. The descriptions of this city are quite detailed; but the neighborhoods described are always meant to underline the social status of the various characters, and their stance vis-à-vis the East and West. For instance, Dovid Karnovski, who is trying to become an accepted member of Berlin Jewish society, lives in an apartment on a fashionable street on the outskirts of the city, far from the teeming Jewish quarter of East European immigrants. And Singer almost entirely ignores the existence of the famous Berlin of the twenties, the scene of artistic avant-garde, Bohemian decadence, and radical politics. There is only one "salon" scene, the main thrust of which is Georg Karnovski's brief infidelity to his wife (on the background of rising political tensions).

Berlin stands for the "city of light" whose aura has tarnished; New York is the epitome of modern chaos, the urban jungle in which only the fittest survive.¹¹ Like Melnits, it is portrayed through the evocation of stereotypes: the noisy vitality of the Lower East Side; the bourgeois affluence of Brooklyn "villas"; and the cosmopolitan bustle of Manhattan. The so-called melting pot is, for the Karnovskis, the final refuge,

the scene of a partial, tentative resolution of the conflicts of the generational and geographic progression.

The small Jewish town of Melnits, in Poland, stands for the East European home, with its shortcomings as well as its virtues. Dovid Karnovski, the product of a proud, stubborn and financially successful family of Polish Jewish merchants and scholars, comes to Melnits as the son-in-law of a leading lumber merchant of the town. He soon succeeds in antagonizing the leading citizens of this shtetl with his modern, newfangled ways. His major offense is the flaunting of Moses Mendelssohn's German Bible translation in the synagogue, and his arrogant praises of this Berlin leader of the German Jewish Enlightenment, whom the traditional members of the Melnits Hasidic congregation consider to have been an apostate and an enemy of the Jewish people.¹² After this embarrassing scene, Karnovski resolves to leave the medieval gloom of Poland, "steeped in darkness," for the city of Berlin, the place of his idol Mendelssohn, which "had always been for him [Dovid Karnovski] the place of enlightenment, wisdom, refinement, beauty and light."¹³

On the one hand, Melnits is typified by the fanatical members of its provincial Hasidic congregation (who are too benighted to appreciate Mendelssohn); on the other, it is presented as the quintessential home, the East European Jewish shtetl. The ambivalence implied by these two views of Melnits is never resolved; and the tension between them is embodied in the difference between Dovid Karnovski's appraisal of Melnits and the attitude of his wife Leah. If Dovid sees the journey from Melnits to Berlin as a pilgrimage, for Leah it is, rather, an exile. Born and raised in Melnits, Leah represents all that is warm, affectionate and intimate in the traditional lifestyle of East European Jews. She is never comfortable in Berlin with her husband's dignified acquaintances, nor with their wives, who disdain her prattle about home and nursery and prefer to discuss the achievements of their distinguished German Jewish ancestors. And the German reform temple is the most alienating place of all for Leah; the prayers, the choir, and the sermons in elegant, flowery German have nothing in common with the Jewishness with which Leah has been raised. In her eyes, "the [German] synagogue, the Holy Ark, the Torah, didn't seem at all Jewish, and even God Himself seemed alien in this ornate, gentile temple . . . [a] carved palace that looked more like a bank than a house of God." (p. 18)

Melnits and Berlin, the two locales that first stand for the conflict of East and West in this novel, are contrasted through the different reactions of the two figures of Leah and Dovid, the matriarch and patriarch of the Karnovski clan. In Berlin itself, this East-West polarity is revealed in the two types of Jews with whom the Karnovskis associate. On the one hand, there are Dovid's friends, "real native [German Jews], the distinguished descendants of generations in this country" (p. 12), the highest social circles of Berlin Jewry into which Dovid is proud to be accepted. The second group is the only society in which Leah feels comfortable: other immigrants from Eastern Europe who preserve their own customs and lifestyle, who survive in Berlin, essentially, by

recreating their native world of Melnits. This active, audacious and shamelessly Eastern type is represented by the figure of Solomon Burak, who runs his profitable business and his comfortable home in the style to which he is accustomed. Burak adapts, but does not assimilate; he succeeds in the German city on his own terms, and with only superficial concessions.

These three characters thus represent three versions of the first-generation Eastern immigrant in the Western city: one who cannot adapt (Leah), one who remakes himself in the Western image (Dovid), and one who adapts on his own terms (Solomon Burak). Singer uses spoken language, and the characters' attitudes toward it, as a hallmark of their cultural position with regard to the East-West polarity. Dovid prides himself on his perfect, grammatical German; Leah is unable to learn that language at all, and persists in speaking Yiddish, despite the admonitions of her husband. Again, we are told of Dovid Karnovski's attitude: "German signified to him Enlightenment, light, Moses Mendelssohn, and Jewish scholarship, while Leah's language stood for the rabbi of Melnits, the cult of Hasidism, stupidity and ignorance" (p. 20). In contrast to Dovid's hypercorrect German is the speech of Solomon Burak, "[German] with the accent and flavor of the street-language of the big city . . . a coarse German that he had learned as a peddler . . . intertwined with Melnits Yiddish and Hebrew" (pp. 21, 23), which emphasizes his vitality and his knack for picking up what is lively and immediate in the local culture, and synthesizing it with his own.

Among the second generation, the Berlin-born sons and daughters of these immigrants, we are shown the different products of Eastern nature and Western nurture. Leah and Dovid Karnovski's son Georg inherits his father's vitality along with his Semitic physiognomy; this energy is clearly meant to be taken as an Eastern quality. Georg's education and social life are predominantly German. This combination seems, for a while, to be an eminently successful one: Georg grows up to be a professional (a doctor), breaking through the barriers of prejudice and anti-semitism by the force of his personality and ability. Georg's lack of interest in the passive, stereotypically Jewish Ruth, the daughter of Solomon Burak, and his subsequent marriage to a Gentile German woman, underline his personal rejection (or mere dismissal) of the East—the Jewish traditions of his parents. Raised according to his father's belief in the credo "Be a Jew at home and a man in the street,"¹⁴ Georg fulfills only the second half. Thus he demonstrates the fallaciousness of the Mendelssohnian ideal of Enlightenment as an attempt to resolve the polarity of East and West, and brings his father to the brink of disillusionment with his lifelong ideal. Dovid loses faith in the native German Jews, and is not so positive now that Melnits represents all that is evil and ignorant while Berlin represents all that is pure and superior.

It is the third generation, the grandchildren of the original immigrants, that Singer uses as the ultimate demonstration of the error of the ideal of Westernization on the German model. The grandson of the Buraks, Ruth's son Marcus, is an intelligent, well adjusted and capable youngster,

whose achievements include academic honors from his American school and publications in Yiddish; he seems destined to succeed in America as his grandfather Solomon had in Berlin. But Yegor, Georg Karnovski's son, is a weak, sickly, neurotic creature who embodies the irreconcilability of the split in his heritage.

While Georg has retained the energy of the East (inherited from his immigrant parents), he is too far from the spiritual source to pass on that vitality to his son. Yegor hates the Jewish half of himself (and his father), and longs to exorcise it and embrace the "pure" Germanic heritage of his Gentile mother. The Oedipal overtones here are amplified by the author's broad Freudian hints. But his characterization is more than a psychoanalytical flourish. Singer holds up the wretched Yegor as ultimate proof of his contention that westward tendencies, without a healthy affirmation and retention of East European Jewish vitality, are pernicious and degenerative, and that such a combination must finally lead to self-hate and self-destruction.

If Berlin is the crucible, the place where East meets West with a variety of results, then New York, where the protagonists arrive in the early thirties, fleeing from the terrors of the Nazi rise to power in Germany, is the testing ground for the previous attempts to amalgamate East and West. For Singer, the essential quality of the American city is its freedom. Here emigrants like Solomon Burak can once again recreate their shtetl society, while incorporating the vital, useful elements of the new culture. Leah, who was never comfortable in Berlin, is free to return to an American version of Melnitz; and the disillusioned Dovid Karnovski relinquishes his pretensions to Westernization and returns to the East European intellectual atmosphere of his youth, transplanted to New York.

The recently uprooted German Jews also recreate an image of their culture; but Singer is careful to indicate that this new German Jewish society is not synthetic, but sterile and isolated from the new culture all around it. In this novel, the author makes a point of showing how the German Jewish refugees refuse to have anything to do with the earlier immigrants from Eastern Europe. The German Jews set up their own businesses, restaurants, and synagogues, and refrain from discussing anything that happened or is happening "over there" (in Germany) with anyone outside of their immediate social circle. Singer shows, with thinly veiled irony, the systematic lowering of the social status of these immigrants: stage actors become café owners, professors open cleaning stores, chemists become beauticians. For consolation, they spend their evenings in the café "Old Berlin," an insulated refuge from the noisy New York streets, a bit of their native city recreated in this new home.

The most successful of the new immigrants is however the quintessential East European Jew, Solomon Burak. As he did in Berlin, he begins in New York by peddling from door to door, and works himself up to a store, eventually moving to a better neighborhood. Once again, he helps relatives to emigrate, and puts them up, feeds them and employs them when they arrive. Burak also becomes the benefactor of the man

who formerly despised him—Dovid Karnovski, who is given a lowly job (that of beadle in a German Jewish synagogue) through the influence of Solomon Burak, who is president of the congregation and its main financial support (a demonstration of how he has turned the tables on the Berlin Jews who once snubbed him as a newcomer to their city). Dovid Karnovski has now come full circle: from his arrogant departure from the Hasidic synagogue in Melnits, through his ignominious exile from the elegant reform temple in Berlin, to a humble position and a reconciliation with Solomon Burak, the man whom he had shunned in Berlin as the incarnation of the boorishness and crudity of the East. But now Dovid, as well as Leah, find peace and even contentment in a new city in which they can revert to the society of those who share their Eastern heritage.

The younger, Berlin-born generations of Karnovskis have a harder time in New York. While Georg appreciates the “great new stony city, free but tough, that had to be faced with great strength and courage” (p. 372), he finds that the new liberty includes the freedom to starve. Georg has trouble continuing his medical career, since he is unable to pass the English examinations, despite his energetic application to learning the new language—which his German wife despairs of ever mastering (the difficulty in linguistic adaptation echoes the experiences of Leah and Dovid Karnovski in learning German). So Georg and his family live by selling the oversized German furniture and, finally, the expensive medical equipment that they had brought over from the other side. This is their first immigrant experience; we see them in the painful process of getting rid of their heavy German “baggage” before they can adapt to the new city.

The third-generation Karnovski, Yegor, finds this American freedom, the freedom of the cosmopolitan Western city, one which permits him to live out his fantasies to their bitter end. Unable to bear the noisy Americans, or his equally boisterous East European cousins, Yegor runs away to Yorkville, the German section of Manhattan. Here—unlike in the old country, to which he constantly longs to return—Yegor can pretend to discard the Jewish half of himself. He goes by his mother’s maiden name, joins a young Nazi group, and tries to work as an informer for the German government. Ironically, his lack of success in this undertaking comes from his inability and unwillingness to infiltrate Jewish groups in New York, where he could gather the information that his employer demands; what Yegor wants is to be as far as possible from that society. Finally, he is deserted by his new friends and betrayed by the German agent who employed him as an informer. When that same employer tries to seduce him, Yegor kills him and returns to his father’s house, where he shoots a bullet into his chest. The novel ends as his father is about to operate in an attempt to save Yegor’s life; and we are not told whether he will be successful or not. But the reconciliation of father and prodigal son is clear: “Yegor took his father’s hand and kissed it . . . smiling the guilty smile of the returning son who asks for understanding and forgiveness . . . deathly ill yet cured of his inferiority.

He [Georg] was proud of him" (p. 518).

The violence, as well as the inconclusiveness, of Yegor's final act expresses Singer's strong feelings *and* his ambivalence toward the immigrant experience that is the focus of this novel. Using the polarity of East and West, the author has, from the beginning, suggested the irreconcilability of what he sees as the two main forces in Jewish life: the vital force of tradition and the fascination with the non-Jewish world outside of that tradition. The abandonment of traditional values, and the striving for "elevation" to Western cultural levels, has been proven false: the promise of Berlin as the ideal society in which Jews (both Eastern and Western) would be accepted and treated according to liberal, humanistic precepts, has been betrayed. The chaos of New York is at least more honest than the deceptive rationality and order of Berlin; but the author sees the American city as a place of freedom and relief from oppression, rather than a site for national, cultural revival. Singer argues here (as he did in an essay of the same period)¹⁵ that the brotherhood of nations is an illusion, and that complete integration (or even relatively comfortable coexistence) in non-Jewish society is impossible, since antisemitism is inevitable as long as Jews live in the Diaspora. In *Di mishpokhe Karnovski*, only those who recognize the essentially temporary nature of their urban Western homes, and who preserve the essence and energy of the East, can survive intact—as does Solomon Burak.

But though he is a survivor (and a financial success), Burak is also a boor. He preserves the primitive life force of the East, but not the spiritual and intellectual achievements to which Dovid Karnovski is the heir. While the older generation can live out its last years in relative comfort (in the versions of Melnits and Berlin recreated in New York), the future generations are doomed. Yegor, the male heir of the Karnovskis, is destroyed by the conflict within himself. And, despite the various successes of other characters, it is with Yegor's attempt at suicide that the novel ends.

For Singer, the movement towards the West—which nineteenth-century Yiddish writers had seen as the symbol of civilization and true humanism—has become a dangerous and potentially fatal journey. The vitality of the East cannot, finally, be preserved without vulgarization or self-destruction. In terms of the Karnovski family, the decline through generations goes along with the increasing distance (actual and spiritual) from the East. While the second generation, the Berlin-born Georg, still preserves the "primeval" energy, his inability to bequeath it to his son Yegor suggests the author's ultimately pessimistic evaluation of what he saw as the tragedy of Jewish history in the twentieth century.¹⁶

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¹ The self-contradiction in this literary stereotyping of the provinces and the urban center is of course an issue in many literatures from classical times onward. See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press,

- 1973). The opposition between the idyllic country and the city replete with problems and obstacles is discussed by Marilyn Sibley Fries in "The Significance of Spatial Constructs in the Literature of the City," in *The City and the Sense of Community* ed. Sander L. Gilman, Occasional Paper, No. 6 (Ithaca, New York: Center for Urban Development Research, Cornell University, April 1976), pp. 38-50.
- ² Williams (pp. 1, 228-29) uses the phrase "city of light" to refer to the affluent sections as opposed to the squalid neighborhoods of the poor (the "city of darkness"), as well as to indicate the myth of the urban center as the locus of education and intellectual illumination. My use of the phrase is limited to the second part of Williams' definition.
- ³ For a discussion of the mythical underpinnings of Abramovitch's Kabtsansk, and other "literary" shtetls, see Dan Miron, "The Image of the Shtetl," *Vivo Bleter*, 47 (in press).
- ⁴ Fries characterizes this aspect of the provincial/urban opposition by identifying the city as antagonist (p. 39), and suggesting that the alienation of the city-dweller is connected with the lack of horizon that leads to a feeling of lack of center, in contrast with the freedom and expanse of country landscape (p. 47).
- ⁵ For a discussion of the history and significance of this scene in *Dos vintshfingerl*, and of the "return of the hero" from Germany to the shtetl in Yiddish and Hebrew literature of the nineteenth century, see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised* (New York: Schocken, 1973), pp. 96-111.
- ⁶ This sentimental retrospective, which turns the (particularly provincial) past into a "golden age," is discussed by Williams (pp. 35-45) in the context of English literature and country life.
- ⁷ Because of the economic difficulties of life in Berlin, and the promise of a livelihood and a chance to publish in the Soviet Union, Kulbak was not the only Yiddish writer to return to the East in the twenties and early thirties. Others included such major figures as David Bergelson, Perets Markish and Der Nister [Pinkhes Kahanovitch].
- ⁸ Williams (pp. 144-64) posits such a dual view of the city as center of corruption and of the beginning of a new social order.
- ⁹ *Di mishpokhe Karnovski* was written in the years 1940-41, serialized in the New York daily *Forverts*, and first published in book form in 1943 (New York Farlag "Matones"). In 1969 there appeared an English version, *The Family Carnovsky*, translated by the author's son Joseph Singer (New York: Vanguard Press).
- ¹⁰ Singer uses history in a similar manner. The time span of the novel extends from the turn of the century, through the Nazi rise to power in the 1930's. While the general historical canvas is painted in broad strokes, which identify rather than describe (or analyze) the social and economic climate of the times, specific events are included (or omitted) according to their relevance to that aspect of the lives of the characters that illustrates Singer's main point. For instance, World War I is not highlighted as the turning point of the twentieth century, nor presented as a military struggle between world powers, nor even described through the direct experiences of the characters. Instead, the war is invoked as the cause of various phenomena: in general, the economic misery of Germany in the twenties and the social unrest which facilitated the rise of fascism; specifically, as a contributing factor to the maturation of Georg Karnovski (who gets his first medical experience on the battlefields, and returns to Berlin as a sober, serious doctor). This war also brings Dovid Karnovski to his first disillusionment with Berlin: his German Jewish friends refuse to help him avoid interment when he is considered an enemy alien during the war with Russia.
- ¹¹ In the novel, Singer never fully develops the possibilities of the city in general, and New York in particular, as a microcosm of the world (Williams, p. 236) or symbol of human life (Fries, pp. 46-47).
- ¹² Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86), one of the leaders of German Jewry and of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, was attacked by Orthodox leaders for his translation of the Pentateuch into German. The translation was subsequently banned by these religious authorities.
- ¹³ *Di mishpokhe Karnovski* (New York: Farlag "Matones," 1943), p. 10. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will be identified by page numbers in parentheses in the text. All quotations are my English renderings.
- ¹⁴ This slogan of the Haskole was formulated by the Hebrew poet Y. L. Gordon, a leading

exponent of reform on the German model.

¹⁵ "A tsvey-toyznt-yeriker toes" [A two-thousand-year-old mistake], *Di tsukunft*, Oct. 1942, pp. 596-602.

¹⁶ This is a revised version of a paper presented at the session, "Berlin and Yiddish Literature" at the AATG 1979 Annual Meeting in Atlanta. I wish to thank Sander L. Gilman for his helpful comments and suggestions.

GERMAN LANGUAGE WEEK

A German Language Week throughout the greater Philadelphia area is being planned for the 23rd to 28th of March 1981.

The purpose of this extensive program, which will be proclaimed by both Governor Thornburgh and Mayor Green, is to encourage the study of German in the greater Philadelphia area.

One highlight of the week will be contests for high school and college students. These contests will focus on language abilities and on a knowledge of the culture of the German speaking countries. Prizes will include among others, books, records and trips to Germany.

Activities are planned which would appeal to German students, Americans of German descent, and to those who have not yet discovered German language and culture. Plays, films, lectures, parties, exhibits and seminars are being scheduled.

Schools, colleges and various *Vereine* plan to sponsor activities which would bring German to their schools and community.

It is hoped that this first German Language Week will win friends and students for German.