

Book Reviews

THE IMAGE AND OTHER STORIES. By Isaac Bashevis Singer. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985. 310 pp. \$17.95.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, when encountered in real life, appears to be the most benign of men. Over a vegetarian lunch in his favorite corner restaurant, he will sit beaming and nodding at his guests, eager to hear not only who they are but to delve into their lives in search of a good story. He has, of course, plenty of his own to tell in return. Infinitely good natured, he can seem, by turns, bemused, nostalgic, avuncular. The unsuspecting may come away from such a meeting convinced that their host — who is now eighty — has dreamily sailed through another social obligation, one of hundreds, to which he will never give a second thought. This would be an error. For Singer is a man who misses nothing, whose camera eye has clicked and faithfully recorded everything around him for a good part of this century, and whose peerless imagination has reached back to the Middle Ages and chronicled Jewish life in those times too. The more specific Singer gets in his depiction of time, place and character — and he never misses a chance to describe the clothing his creations wear or the meals they eat, down to the last morsel of dessert — the more universal he seems to become. Japanese is just one of the 60 languages into which he has been translated. *The Image and Other Stories*, his current collection of tales, shows that Singer has lost none of his power. This, in itself, is a sort of miracle. There is nothing benign about these stories either; they boil and bubble with passion more than ever.

In "Advice," Morris Pintchover, an accountant and Yiddish poet, is so enamored of his frumpy wife, Tamara, that when she leaves him for a lover — Lenchner, a Yiddish Communist writer — he invites both to come live with him. In "Strong as Death is Love," a Polish squire, crazed by passion, digs up his wife's skeleton and sleeps with it. Fela's overriding desire in "One Day of Happiness" is somehow to meet the Polish hero Pacholski, who is both an army general and a renowned poet. "Fela's love for Adam Pacholski had

bewildered her. She saw everything around her through a fog. She couldn't cross the room without stumbling into chairs, the table, the commode. When her mother gave her a glass of tea, she would let it slip through her fingers." The homely girl's wish is fulfilled. And it destroys her life. In the title story, "The Image," the specter of Yakir, a former lover, comes between Zylka and her groom, thwarting the consummation of their marriage. Is it a dybbuk or the bride's own hysteria? The narrator's mother declares in the tale's final sentences: "A dybbuk talks, screams, howls, wails, and therefore he can be exorcised. Melancholy is silent, and therein lies its uncanny power."

Singer obviously has not abandoned his usual themes in this collection. His characters are often their own worst enemies, the victims of their wayward passions. Lust, jealousy, obsession run rampant through these pages. But there is also spiritual passion as a redemptive counterforce. In "A Nest Egg for Paradise," Reb Mendel, a devout Hassid, is tricked into a moment of sin by his sister-in-law Lisa-Hadas, and so driven to utter despair, convinced he has lost the world to come. But his one sin turns out to be a blessing, for it prompts Reb Mendel to dedicate himself to a life of joyous service in *this* world. "Instead of being flung into the depths of Sheol, as he deserved to be, Reb Mendel was surrounded with Torah, with wisdom, with the love and the warmth of fellow Jews." The hero of "Why Heisherik Was Born" is a pest and crackpot whose character defects become sterling assets during the Holocaust. Reb Amram, in "The Pocket Remembered," almost commits a sin and in the process loses an inconsequential amount of his squire's money. These events, which might have led to Reb Amram's ruin, instead force him to take stock of his life, change it, and thus realize his most cherished desire.

The stories in this volume all bear the author's patented trademark: They are virtually impossible to put down. No dybbuks romp through these tales, and only one ghost, in "The Enemy." The supernatural, to a far greater extent than on previous occasions, takes a back seat, and is mostly viewed as a metaphor for the psychological.

What is most striking here is Singer's scope. "Confused" is a tragi-comic confrontation between a famous elderly author and two utterly deranged women. It takes place on Manhattan's Upper West Side. "Loshikl" begins in a Polish jail cell where four Jewish prisoners — all underworld figures — tell each other stories, which, naturally enough, teem with underworld lingo. "The Interview" takes place in Poland between both World Wars; its protagonists are a young aspiring writer, a philosophy professor and a pornographic Yiddish poetess. All the characters in these 22 stories come brilliantly to life. Whether 20th-century New Yorkers or 19th-century Eastern Europeans, whether pious or worldly, they are striking examples of Isaac Singer's undiminished, nonpareil ability to observe, imagine and create.

— Isidore Haiblum

FROM THE FAIR: The Autobiography of Sholom Aleichem. Translated, edited and with an introduction by Curt Leviant. Viking, 1985. 262 pp. \$20.00.

In describing himself, Sholom Aleichem writes that "His profoundest wish was that, God willing when he grew up and became an adult, he too would write a book that would make Jews laugh. . . ." Sholom Aleichem realized the opportunity, denied to most people, of fulfilling his profoundest wish. He indeed has made generations of Jews laugh.

At age 49 after having "had the privilege of meeting his majesty, the Angel of Death face to face," Sholom Aleichem set out to write the story of his life. His life, his people and his times all blend in *From the Fair* to give us a loving, humorous and poignant glimpse of Jewish life within the Pale of Settlement in Czarist Russia in the latter part of the 19th century.

Fortunately for the English reader, *From the Fair* is the first complete English translation of Sholom Aleichem's autobiography. Translation is an exercise in empathy with the author. Curt Leviant, the award-winning translator of three previous collections of Sholom Aleichem's stories, abounds with em-

pathy as he faithfully translates Sholom Aleichem from his rich and colorful Yiddish.

It was precisely because of his rich and colorful Yiddish that Sholom Aleichem reached out to the Jews to whom he wanted to bring laughter, to Jews in a troubled world. Because he wrote in Yiddish — not in Hebrew, which only the elite few could understand at the time — these Jews knew he was writing *for* them as well as *about* them.

Writing in the third person, Sholom Aleichem makes his autobiography read like a novel filled with the flavor of his time, giving us a faithful vignette of a vanished world.

Sholom Aleichem, literally meaning "peace unto you," was the pseudonym of Sholom Rabinowitz. Sholom was born in 1859 in Voronko, Russia, and his portrayal of his growing up focuses on the shtetl, Torah studies and *cheder*, where he was an outstanding and mischievous student. When his family is forced to move from Voronko because of economic reasons, young Sholom faces hardships and tragedies (his mother Chaya Esther dies during a cholera epidemic) that mold him into an young man who is determined to make enough of a living to remove severe financial strain from his father.

As he is growing up, Sholom Aleichem introduces us to beloved and familiar characters: Shmulik the Orphan, who filled his head with tales of buried treasure; Gergelah Ganav, always looking for an angle; Feigeleh the Witch, Arnold of Pidvok, and attorney-at-law Applebaum who cheats Sholom Aleichem out of his money.

With bittersweet humor, he introduces us to Tzali the Cantor's daughter, his first love, and we rejoice with adolescent Sholom only to share his pain and sense of bewilderment when he learns she has married a *goy*. We also

share young adult Sholom's frustration as his first real job ends in anguish and agony.

Above all else, Sholom is a compelling storyteller, who makes his world become real before us and who truly has shared with us his "crowning achievement, my book of books, the Song of Songs of my soul."

Sholom Aleichem died in 1916, while he was in the midst of his writing, and we cannot help but feel somehow cheated that he was not given more time to share his great talent with us and with future generations. However, we can best show our thankfulness to Sholom Aleichem by fulfilling the request he made to his children in 1916 when he wrote the dedication for *From the Fair*. We can "read it from time to time. Perhaps you or your children will learn something from it — how to love our people and appreciate their spiritual treasures that lie scattered in all the dark corners of the vast Diaspora in this large world."

— Eliezer Silverman

PAINFUL ECHOES . . . Poems of the Holocaust. From the Diary of Luba Krugman Gurdus. Illustrated Polish/English edition. Schocken, 1985. 68 pp. \$14.95. Paper.

Luba Krugman Gurdus is a survivor of the Majdenek concentration camp. Released to Warsaw, she was witness to the enormous tragedies of the ghetto. Feeling the powerlessness that comes with horror, she wrote a poem — and therein began the recollections, in verse and illustration, that comprise this very moving artistic memoir.

The titles of Gurdus's drawings and poems tell the whole story. Simple, precise, they are irrefutable in their clarity: AIR RAID, WAR, DESTRUCTION, FIRST DEPORTATION FROM ZWIERZYNIEC. Together



MOTHERS

with these are loving and painful portraits of family members enduring great tragedy: parents and children, sisters and brothers. Through graceful lines, Gurdus tells the story of an incomparable evil, an evil she manages to capture with an unusual phrase, a simple expression. In one of the volume's most successful poems, called CRAVING, Gurdus says:

*I crave so much for someone's heart
I long so much for someone's word
To soothe and still my aching woe
And shorten my tortuous road.
I want so much to reveal my fight
And openly speak of my storms and defeats*

*I want to shed anguish on a lonely night
And cry long and loud of my misery.*

This volume is that cry, that long and loud wailing that remains, in spite of the boundless pain, to contain its own very particular kind of grace: the grace that comes from controlling a line, a thought, a particular sentence. With a glimpse of a face, through a dream or a sob, Gurdus shows a very personal picture of horror, a horror she captures with art.

— Esther Cohen

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