and take over Jordan in the East, and it threatens Syria and Saudi Arabia, and through Egypt, North Africa too.

Still, it's not too late to reverse the apocalyptic trend. The situation can be saved if the Likud were to come to power, and limit the degree of Palestinian autonomy in Gaza. But just how this would be done, and whether it would entail moving the Israeli army back into Gaza, Netanyahu doesn't say. His position in the book, though, seems much tougher than the new pragmatism sweeping through his party.

One of the cardinal rules in the fight against terror, Netanyahu says, is to hang tough and to resist the shrill criticism and panic responses of the masses and the yellow press alike. But Netanyahu himself did more than anyone to stir up panic in response to the fundamentalists' suicide bomb attacks. The late Yitzhak Rabin called it "dancing on the blood," implying that Netanyahu hoped to reap political benefit from the terror.

FOR NETANYAHU THERE IS ONE terroristic development of the 1990s more ominous than Gaza: the specter of nuclear terrorism. Iran, he says, is almost certain to go nuclear within three to seven years. Then, he suggests, the bomb in the basement of the next World Trade Center could be a nuclear one. Militant Islamicists, pursuing irrational goals by irrational means, could hold entire cities hostage.

To nullify the threat, Netanyahu has a 10-point plan, which includes calls for the imposition of sanctions on suppliers of nuclear technology to terrorist states; of diplomatic, economic and military sanctions on terrorist states; and the neutralization of terrorist enclaves like that of the Hizballah in South Lebanon and the "PLO-Hamas fiefdom" in Gaza.

For all its thoroughness, Netanyahu's list contains little that is new or untried. His book leaves the distinct impression that it was designed less to chart a program against terror than to stir up American opposition to Labor's peace policies and more sympathy for the Likud's hard line. Netanyahu's party has long been at pains to persuade American decision-makers to cut off funds to the Palestinian Authority. This book seems to be another part of that effort. Ironically, if successful, Netanyahu's dark vision could become a self-fulfilling prophecy: By jeopardizing the existence of the Authority, it could help push the Palestinians back into the embrace of terror the author says they never renounced. ❑

Creative Betrayers

Behind every Yiddish storyteller, it seems, there lies a story

STUART SCHOFFMAN

A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling. *by David G. Roskies. Harvard University Press: 419 pp.; $37.50.*

Journey to My Father, Isaac Bashevis Singer. *by Israel Zamir. Translated from the Hebrew by Barbara Harshav. Arcade Publishing: 240 pp.; $21.95.*

LIKE TOO MANY TRADITIONAL American Jews of my generation, I feel impoverished by my meager Yiddish, the language our parents, the children of immigrants, spoke to one another when they didn't want the kids to understand. Mine is an attenuated, filtered relationship with the *mameh-loshen* — the occasional pungent idiom to pepper my prose, the rote-memorized folk song, the reading of Sholem Aleichem in Hebrew and Isaac Bashevis Singer in English. But in South Africa, Australia and Canada, Jews my age are more likely to have spoken Yiddish with their own immigrant parents, and I imagine it's no accident that David Roskies, professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and Yiddishist extraordinary, is from Montreal. His is a book I read with admiration, envy and bewilderment.

Roskies demonstrates authoritatively that to create modern Yiddish culture is to reinvent it continually, "to synthesize old and new," to engage in what he calls "creative betrayal" — an "attempt to address contemporary concerns in the language(s) of tradition." Yiddish storytellers, from Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810) to Roskies's contemporary Steve Stern, the wonderful Tennessee-born author who writes fables in English about bygone Jews in Memphis, have always found the necessary combination of wine and bottles with which to perpetuate the Eastern European heritage, and simultaneously subvert it. I.L. Peretz, for example, "wanted a Jewish humanism and piety without Jewish law," and thus appropriated hasidic folk tales to illustrate such secular values as moral courage and redemption through love.

Part of the Ashkenazi heritage is *b'kiyus*, a Hebraic Yiddishism connoting encyclopedic expertise of the Talmud, a quality that is secularized in our own age in such dazzling academic performances as this one. Yet Roskies, in keeping with his subject, also endeavors to "creatively betray" his genre and play the role of scholar as storyteller. The book is richly illustrated with folkish drawings from Yiddish books. Each chapter has a hero, a Yiddish literary artist whose career is a classic tale of "rebellion, loss, and return." Roskies also appreciates the importance of variation, repetition, wordplay and surprise. The book's great delight is the way he summarizes and re-summarizes his ideas, ever more ingeniously and dramatically, packing them as tight as a midrash.

- "Sholem Aleichem provided his readers, scattered over the far reaches of earth, with what they needed most: the holidays recloaked as carnivals; the grotesque reality as broken-down myths; the Russified reformer as beloved raconteur."
- "Had [I.L.] Peretz remained a provincial lawyer and never moved to Warsaw; had he not been hired to chronicle the impoverishment of Polish Jewry; had he not been exposed to various utopian alternatives; and had he not been imprisoned for endorsing one of them, he would never have become the master architect of Jewish modernism."
- "Reading Singer in the original from start to finish . . . allows us to see him for what he really was: never more Yiddish than when writing about demons; never more playful, youthful, or hopeful than when writing as a demon."

The bulk of the book, however, consists of close readings of Yiddish texts that inevitably lose much in synopsis and translation. Many of Roskies's exuberant insights, however hip or clever, may seem opaque to someone unfamiliar with, say, Peretz's story "A Pinch of Snuff," in which "the rabbi of Chelm deserves to be the jack-of-all jokes not because he can't choose between right and wrong, but because he can't dream even an implausible dream." On the other hand, who can resist a text that calls the climax of Rabbi

Nahman's tale "The Master of Prayer," in which a foul wind makes money stink like excrement, "scatology as eschatology," and subversively — so Yiddishly — plants words like "piss" and "take a leak" in a volume of the Harvard University Press?

On the third hand (are not all stories made of threes?) this is a study written foremost for insiders, who may be defined as those who know without being told that the "Akedah" is Hebrew for Abraham's binding of Isaac, and who can read the following passage, regarding the symbolist writer Der Nister, without blinking: "If this is the mystic's *via passiva*, then something is not right. 'Truth lies in the ground' is familiar enough as the Kotzker Rebbe's famous paraphrase of Psalm 85:12, the slogan of his lifelong struggle for absolute truthfulness."

IF ONE CROSSES "A BRIDGE OF Longing" feeling unexpectedly distanced from the emotional mother lode, an evening curled up with Israel Zamir's modest, affecting book has the opposite effect. In 1935, Isaac Bashevis Singer left his wife and 5-year-old son "Gigi" in Warsaw, promising to send for them after he settled himself in America. But Singer — as his only child, an Israeli journalist, now tells us — was a selfish, stingy man and compulsive womanizer, who broke that promise along with many others. (In 1985, at the age of 81, but with a Nobel Prize under his belt, Singer was named one of the Ten Sexiest Men in America by McCall's magazine.) The boy and his mother made their way to Palestine, and Zamir did not see his father again until 1955, when he went to visit Singer in New York.

He found a man who lay in bed from seven to nine thinking up stories, then spent the rest of the morning in his bathrobe in an armchair, writing them down. Afternoons Singer would stroll down Broadway, feeding pigeons, whom he addressed in Yiddish. "His feet walked in the twentieth century, but his ears were tuned to secret, mysterious voices." If Singer in these pages resembles a character from one of his own stories, it befits an author who drew, as Zamir says, all his characters from real life: "I know, for I have witnessed it with my own eyes or heard him tell me about events in his own life. He had to have known someone to be able to describe that person and lead him on the paths of the imagination. All my father seemed to need was a grain of truth to construct a fictitious plot." And a little help from above: "'Sometimes the plot of my story is stuck like a cart in the mud,'" Singer told his son. "'I prostrate myself, hesitate, sometimes put in a prayer to Him, and suddenly a heavenly illumination, and the cart slides out of the swampy mud. The belief that man is the master of his fate is as far from me as east is from west . . . We long for faith as much as we yearn for sex.'"

"His religious and mystical beliefs are still alien to me," writes Zamir. At 25 the author was a diehard Marxist, a Hashomer Hatza'ir kibbutznik who venerated Stalin — "I wanted to live by the sweat of my brow . . . and not be a luftmensch like my father" — even as Singer worried that the son's affiliations would get the father deported from McCarthyite America. Over the years they saw each other regularly, not least because Zamir translated most of his father's works into Hebrew — free of charge. Singer had virtually nothing to do with his four grandchildren, yet at the 1978 Nobel banquet in Stockholm (as reported by Zamir, who accompanied his father) offered 10 reasons why he loved writing for children: "Number 6. They don't try to understand Kafka or 'Finnegans Wake.' Number 7. They still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation, and other such obsolete stuff. Number 8. They love interesting stories, not commentary, guides, or footnotes."

FROM JOURNEY TO MY FATHER

NOBEL CEREMONY, 1978: Zamir learned that to his father went the glory

Indeed, "Journey to My Father" is so simple and unpretentious that it reads like a book for youngsters, for the child in us all — a true tale of rebellion, loss and return by a grandfather in his 60s who still sounds like the wounded son of a legendary father. In 1980, Zamir tells us, he published a Hebrew book of his own stories, but when he presented it to Singer, "he gave it back to me with an angry expression: 'Why don't you translate my books instead of writing your own?' His words were like a bucket of ice water poured on my head."

This warm, touching memoir is Zamir's vindication. The Nobel Prize robbed Singer of his privacy; people stopped him for autographs and "the pigeons wouldn't come down from their roofs because of the crowd that had gathered around him." He suffered from Alzheimer's and was buried in New Jersey: "In Israel, Singer's grave would have become a pilgrimage site," writes his son, who failed to persuade his father's widow Alma to have him buried in the Jewish homeland. "But this godforsaken place would attract no one."

In the end, Zamir's resentment surrenders to pathos, almost to love. "I came to know his life, his past, and our rich and lush Jewish culture, whose aromas intoxicate me," writes Zamir. "Despite distance, hearts manage to make contact in their own twisted and complicated way." ❑