

BOOK REVIEWS

STORIES. By Meir Blinkin. Translated from the Yiddish by Max Rosenfeld. Introduction by Ruth R. Wisse. McGill University, 1983. 166 pp. \$10.95.

Even in Yiddish circles Meir Blinkin's name is hardly a household word; in fact, he is virtually unknown. No English tomes celebrating the virtues of Yiddish literature have until now bothered to cite his accomplishments. Yet, at his death in 1915 — just before his thirty-sixth birthday — Blinkin's was a name to conjure with. He was eulogized on the steps of the *Jewish Daily Forward* on East Broadway, and a huge crowd mourned the untimely passing of so promising a talent.

He was one of *di yunge*, that hearty group of young writers who rallied against the older generation of sweatshop poets and raised high the banners of a new estheticism. Some of Blinkin's stories seem strikingly modern.

In "Card Game," the beautiful Fanya is kept in splendid isolation by her compulsively jealous husband Moyshe. To divert her, Moyshe invites into his home Yudin — a friend of long ago — and a sleazy clique of loose-living, card playing ladies. And Fanya, undone by her boredom, sexual fantasies and new acquaintances, becomes an adulteress.

Shifra, the heroine of "The Mysterious Secret," sees social conventions as a sham. She is driven to madness by the thought of people's duplicity. Along the way she picks up a lover: "As soon as they were inside she locked the door, put the key in her pocket and began tearing off her clothes. When she was completely naked she demanded, 'You, too, Nochem! Take off all your clothes.'"

"Family Life: A Chapter" depicts a liaison between a wife and her brother-in-law who is also her secret lover and father of her youngest child.

Illicit sex? Adultery? Madness? In Yiddish fiction shortly after the turn of the century? All this and more can be found in Blinkin. But sensationalism was never an end in itself. As Ruth Wisse points out in her splendid introduction: "He [Blinkin] was fascinated by the volatile interaction between men and women, and this attraction he explored both for its own sake and for the

insight it yielded about the elemental nature of the human being."

Many of these tales are told from the woman's viewpoint. This in itself — for that day and age in Yiddish letters — is something of a novelty. But Blinkin brings it off. And his female characters, often self-absorbed, at loggerheads with their environment, emerge as complete individuals.

In "Dr. Machover," Blinkin demonstrates that he can handle men with equal authority. Moyshe-David is a talmud *khukhum*, a genius, whose life is devoted to endless study in the *Bes-Medresh*. But one day he finds a handwritten inscription in one of the holy books that challenges all his beliefs — and ultimately sends him off into the wide world to become a secularist. Machover's dilemma is his inability to find a satisfactory substitute, either in science or philosophy, for the Orthodox faith of his youth. This is a theme which often crops up in the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer — who was only 11 when Blinkin died — and its presence here, so early in the game, is startling.

Singer has often complained that Yiddish literature was mostly didactic and sentimental. But a significant number of Yiddish writers avoided both these pitfalls. And Meir Blinkin and his *yunge* colleagues were among them. His *Stories* — excellently translated by Max Rosenfeld — are as fresh and intriguing today as when they were first written. They show us where we came from, and by preserving part of our past, help us understand who we are.

— Isidore Haiblum

FROM HESTER STREET TO HOLLYWOOD — THE JEWISH-AMERICAN STAGE AND SCREEN. Edited by Sarah Blacher Cohen. Indiana University Press, 1983. 278 pp. \$22.50.

The Yiddish Theater at the turn of the century was a going concern. By 1918, there were some 20 theaters in New York City alone. Such derring-do luminaries as Jacob P. Adler, David Kessler, Boris Tomashevsky, dazzled the Yiddish audience with their bravura performances; Sigmund Mogulesko — the great Yiddish clown — made them roar with laughter, while such five-star heroines as Bertha Kalich, Sara Adler

and Bessie Tomashevsky won their hearts. Applause echoed through the Lower East Side streets of New York, drifted uptown to Broadway and then across the continent to Hollywood. America took notice.

Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, all brought a Yiddish tear and chuckle to their nonpareil acts. Paul Muni, Stella Adler and Molly Picon bowed off the Yiddish stage and high-stepped into the mainstream of American culture.

While the Yiddish popular theater ballyhooed its stars and put on old-fashioned theatrical extravaganzas, the more serious companies experimented with new techniques. Stanislavsky held sway at the Yiddish Art Theater and the left-wing Artef delved into the myriad mysteries of expressionism. All this found its way into English, too.

The tradition of the stand-up comic — as Nahma Sandrow points out in "Yiddish Theater and American Theater" — is also firmly anchored in Yiddish history. It can be traced back to the *badkhon*, the wedding jester who even today performs at Hasidic weddings. His offsprings are the likes of Lenny Bruce, Shelly Berman, Mort Sahl, Woody Allen.

This story — essentially one of the backwoods provincial who made good and turned the world on its ear — is explored in *From Hester Street to Hollywood — the Jewish-American Stage and Screen*. Edited, and with an excellent introduction by Sarah Blacher Cohen, the volume contains eighteen original essays — all by professors — that are ashimmer with erudition, wit and intellectual fireworks.

Anthony Lewis, "The Jew in Stand-up Comedy," tells us: "Comedians have traditionally posed either as predators or prey . . . antagonistic or ingratiating. Jews found these postures not simply good performance attitudes but two perfect vehicles through which they could comment, consciously or unconsciously, on their being Jews."

In "The Mental Comedies of Saul Bellow," Keith Opdahl happily sifts through the Nobel Prize winner's few plays and finds among other nuggets that "Bellow reflects a typically Jewish love of language."

Sarah Blacher Cohen tackles another Nobel Prize winner in "The Jewish Folk Drama of Isaac Bashevis Singer." She says, "Through deceptively sim-

ple writing, he [Singer] has artfully fashioned a naïve world where wonder and superstition prevail over skepticism and reason." Singer's plays — the first one, "The Mirror," written when he was 68 — all done in collaboration, are probed with great insight by Ms. Cohen. Her conclusion is right on the mark when she writes, "Like Yiddish theater, Singer's plays are an entertaining substitute religion that revives the dead past and evokes communal solidarity in the present."

The same can be said of the best essays in this volume. Whether the subject is Woody Allen in "The Failure of the Therapeutic" (Mark Shechner): "Allen has been something of a closet tragedian all along, and the air of cosmic befuddlement that now colors his thought was there from the start," and Shechner quotes Allen as saying "The metaphor for life is a concentration camp. I do believe that"; or whether it is "Mel Brooks and the Cinema of Exhaustion" (Sanford Pinsker): "he [Brooks] was at once a parody of the Wise Old Jew and an interloper at the watering holes of High Culture" — the reader will find plenty that will amuse, stimulate and provoke.

— Isidore Haiblum

FROM A RUINED GARDEN. The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry. Translated and edited by Jack Kugelmas and Jonathan Boyarin. Schocken Books, 1983. 275 pp. \$18.95.

From a Ruined Garden is a book larger than it is. If this sounds like an anomaly, remember that this volume is an anthology of selections culled from hundreds of memorial books. These volumes, paper Kaddishes and yizkors in essence, were holy missions undertaken by survivors who sought some kind of resurrection for their murdered brethren and destroyed communities and culture.

In this work, edited by J. Kugelmas and J. Boyarin, we see communities in peace, in study, in celebration, and in strife with the outside world and, occasionally, with themselves. We see the ethical heartbeat of Yiddishkeit, and we also see the impending doom: the onset of German power and traditional Polish anti-Semitism forming an unholy alliance for ultimate destruction.

For those who might assume that all Jews are businessmen, turn the pages and meet Jewish lumberjacks and sievemakers and milk peddlers and all kinds of artisans. For those who think that all Talmud Torah teachers were

rough, read the tender memoir of a loving melamed. For those who repeat that Jews were always cowed by an aggressive Polish anti-Semitism, read about the burly Jewish porters in Warsaw and note the following:

In the parliamentary anti-Semitism between the World Wars, the Polish regime sought to deny Jews a living by, among other things, ordering that market days be held on the Sabbath. "[It] was a heavy blow to the Jews. [But] not a single Jew in Kolbishov opened his store on the Sabbath." In fact, most of the gentile peasants stayed away too and the authorities "finally had to give up the plan."

Among the depictions of Jewish celebrations is an especially engaging memoir of a three-day Purim binge, with the moveable feast going from one town to another with a horse-drawn sleigh. And another account illustrates the unique Jewish institution known as "essen tag" — eating days. In a town where a yeshiva was located, rich and poor alike vied for the mitzva of feeding a yeshiva boy one day a week.

Since the memorial books were written in the aftermath of the greatest tragedy the Jews ever suffered, no wonder they contain so little laughter. Of course Jewish wit, folklore and humor existed, but for its full panoply one must turn to the classic modern Yiddish writers who did not have the onus of yizkor like a yoke on their shoulders. Although technically *From a Ruined Garden* is not a Holocaust work, the black shadow of the 1930s and the 1940s is omnipresent.

Coupled with the Holocaust is the attitude of the Poles during and after the war. A horrifying scene, all the more painful because it happened after the liberation (one of many such pogroms in Poland in 1945 and 1946) to Jewish survivors, is vividly described by a woman who sees Poles coldbloodedly murder four Jews in a village and miraculously survives herself. But there is also — albeit too rare — an occasional spark of decency. A priest who helped an eight-year-old girl survive is tortured to death by the Germans but doesn't break down to reveal her whereabouts. And a farmer who out of decency hid 12 Jews is "rewarded" with a beating by Polish partisans for his crime.

Several misreadings of Yiddish words occur in the text, and there is one blatant error. No Jew, as the editors aver, is ever called up "to bless a portion of the Torah reading." Jews bless God. Period. They make a blessing to God over wine, challah, candles, the Torah. Christians bless material ob-

jects. And in a "correction" of a memoirist's chronology, the editors state that Auschwitz was liberated in October 1944. But the editors are wrong. Auschwitz was liberated on January 27, 1945, and transports of Jews were still arriving there in January.

There is a wonderful phrase in the Midrash where in typical Midrashic magic a verse is able to speak and say: "Interpret me!" Likewise this excellent book. Every selection calls out: "Quote me!" Which means of course, buy two copies of *From a Ruined Garden* and give one to a friend.

The book also contains a very useful geographical index and bibliography of the extant memorial volumes, an encyclopedic task carefully accomplished by Zachary M. Baker.

Here in this anthology of a now classic genre we have much of what we read in Yiddish fiction: the teacher, the rabbi, the plain lovely folk, the town fool, the Hasidim, the Misnagdim, the saints, the schemers, the holidays, the indoors and out. But here it is not fiction. Here are the memories of which fiction is made.

— Curt Leviant

THE ONE-STAR JEW. By David Evanier. North Point Press, 1983. 256 pp. \$15.00.

David Evanier's *The One-Star Jew* is a collection of short stories that chronicles experiences in the life of the narrator-protagonist Bruce Orav. Set in New York, with its many neighborhoods providing the scenery, the stories richly weave the patterns of Bruce's life.

Bruce is a Jewish writer. He is skillfully portrayed throughout these stories as a troubled child, a rebelling adolescent, a radical student, a considerate husband, a devoted son. He is a loving man, but is beset by troubles, particularly with his beautiful mother, an abusive, disturbed woman. The stories are diverse, yet they are unified by a cast of central characters — Bruce, his parents and wife Susan.

Evanier's technique of shifting back and forth between time periods in a single story is very effective, as we are able to view Bruce as a teenager and an adult and to see his relationship with his parents develop.

The first selection in the book, "The Creator of One-Fingered Lily," relates Bruce's first meeting with his mother after a 20-year hiatus. Flashbacks of Bruce's youth are interspersed between their phone conversations in which they set up the meeting. Evanier's evi-