

Yiddish Buffs Have A Bash

by ISIDORE HAIBLUM

IN their late teens and early twenties they came—the misters either in suits and jackets or bearded, blue-jeaned and army-garbed, the young ladies in snazzy costumes too numerous and spangled to denote—by subway, bus and the notorious car, from all the near and distant corners of New York. They came from six states of the Union (California included) and from Canada. They *might* have come from Buenos Aires, Cambridge and Tel Aviv too, for their members reside in these far-off climes as well. Here they were to catch Isaac Bashevis Singer in Yiddish and, not incidentally, to celebrate the extraordinary fact of their own existence. “They” are Youth for Yiddish, otherwise known as *Yugntruf*, and each year since their inception nine years ago they have pulled off an annual convention, a shindig that sometimes confounds and confuses their elders. Why should this one be an exception? I pack my pencil and go.

The five-story brick building itself on East 78th Street and Madison Avenue, a Yiddish catch-all, housing a notable collection of institutions (including a justly-famed underground eatery in its basement) is dark this day except for the second-floor youth bash and the bottleneck in the lobby. The bottleneck is where you buy your ticket to get upstairs to the narrow rented hall. As I wait in line a small man approaches, hands me a book. “A gift,” he says. A volume of Yiddish poems by an author unknown to me. This man, I see, has set up shop on a table off to one side and is busily dispensing copies of the book to anyone who appears a likely reader. Now there is a Yiddish bookstore in the building too, but this is not its proprietor, who is up ahead in line. My friend, the book-giver, works in another office en-

tirely, one that apparently has a surplus of Yiddish books. And to save a Yiddish book from oblivion is a *mitzvah*. My friend is ringing up *mitzvahs* by the score.

As I work my way to the staircase, I am stopped by the bookstore proprietor himself, who earnestly berates me for tardiness. A new edition of my favorite Yiddish journal—*die goldene keyt*—has been in stock for a month now, so where have I been? I promise to claim my copy and go upstairs. The crowd is thick, a milling melange of old and young. A heavy-set man approaches to pump my hand. It is the proprietor of a left-wing Yiddish book store based downtown. I promise to drop around as soon as I can. Imagine! Both bitter, one-time rivals under one roof! *Yugntruf*, it should be noted about now, is neither political nor ideological. It is not religious. Its sole aim, in fact, is to boost Yiddish as a *living* language and culture, a not-too-esoteric scheme in a decade of identity hunters. There is a precedent. A vast array of Yiddish luminaries in decades past plugged these quite secular concerns, held themselves to be a *nationality*, and in novel, essay, song and story fêted this concept. But the members of *Yugntruf* are, each and every one of them, very much ideological and political, and assorted activists regularly turn up at their confabs to draw *nakhes*, mingle and stare at each other.

A hand suddenly reaches out from a cluster of bodies to grasp mine. A bespectacled face beams at me for an instant before being swallowed up by the crush. Ah yes. This is Dr. Mordkhe Schaechter, godfather to Youth for Yiddish and, for the moment, a very busy man. In his early forties, Dr. Schaechter is one of the world's top three Yiddish linguists. He is also something of a maverick. Yiddish, being more a state of mind than a definable geographic state, has always had to grapple with indigenous tongues which tend to elbow aside nifty

Yiddish words (kick around grammar and scramble spelling) in favor of the home-grown variety. Three to four million—or so the estimate runs—speak Yiddish, but they are scattered across the globe, and if they are to understand each other's books (135 new ones each year), newspapers and casual conversations (let alone preserve the spirit of the language), linguistic standards must be maintained. Dr. Schaechter, a one-man Yiddish university, takes on the spoilers, many of whom are the Yiddish establishment, and, not surprisingly, there is much grumbling to be heard. More surprising is Schaechter's score card; backed by his college-trained coterie, Schaechter's classy Yiddish words have been cropping up more and more in the generally recalcitrant Yiddish press. Schaechter is one of the heroes of this convention.

I set out to find the other hero, Isaac Singer. He is somewhere in the crowd. Between Schaechter and Singer there are some similarities. Despite his world-wide acclaim, Singer's name does not bring instant joy to the hearts of all the Yiddish masses. Some, but not all. Singer, too, is a maverick. The real McCoy, an original, a first-rate artist, he has gone his own way, choosing his own subject matter and cheerfully ignoring the friendly advice of establishment literati. His Yiddish readers are often shocked and bemused by Singer's strange ways. But to the *Yugntruf* buffs he speaks as a contemporary. And they all, no less, read him in the original.

I do not find the guest of honor, although people assure me he is there somewhere, last seen sitting alone and just dying for a quiet Yiddish chat with a youngster. Instead I run into Bella Schaechter-Gottesman—the linguist's sister—a Yiddish poet who, to my delight, produces an autographed copy of her new book. My second gift of the day!! I quickly calculate that after intermission cake and coffee I'll have made back the price of admission twice over. A gavel bangs my dream of profits to order. Singer is on stage. I find a seat.

Looking quizzically owl-like and wise, youthful and remarkably trim in a neat black suit, our author addresses the throng. Is it my imagination, or does he seem a bit rattled at the prospect of speaking Yiddish to all these youngies? The moment

Isidore Haiblum is an American novelist.

passes. Singer is obviously enjoying himself. Thirty-five years ago he explains, when he asked Abe Cahan, editor of *The Jewish Daily Forward*, for a job, Cahan assured him there was no future in Yiddish journalism. Now look at all the kids speaking Yiddish here! Instead of being a hundred-per cent pessimist about the future of Yiddish, he has just slipped to ninety-eight. Which is pretty good for him since he is by nature a terrible pessimist. When they ask him at colleges why he writes in a dead language, he points out that in Jewish life it's a long way between being sick and dead.

Here, unfolding a typewritten manuscript, Singer reads Chapter Three of a forthcoming novella about a wayward *shtetl* rabbi. In a couple of weeks, he says, we can all read it in the *Yiddish Forward*. (Later it will, no doubt, be translated into English, its unlikely milieu gracing a glossy *New Yorker* page.)

Extemporizing again, he reviews the trials of *mame-loshn*, its former lack of recognition: people, with no concept of a folk language, with no knowledge of how a language developed, looked askance at Yiddish, didn't grasp its uniqueness, failed to see it as a way of life, a philosophy. Now Hebrew is a Jewish language too, but it's very hard to be humorous in Hebrew, which is a very earnest tongue. Once, he heard about a genius, a Yiddish speaker with no sense of humor. Not to have a sense of humor in Yiddish requires a true genius. And yes, when he finally met the man, it turned out not to be an exaggeration—he was a genius. "In every Yiddish heart," says Singer, "there sleeps a human dictionary." When he was young, Hebrew was hardly a going concern. But people made an effort to revive it. All it takes to keep a language, a culture alive is the will to do so.

I lay aside my pencil here. Jotting and listening is a hardship. I become a mere spectator for the next 20 minutes, intent on enjoying myself; I do.

"Questions please," Singer asks when the applause subsides, donning dark glasses, "so I can see you better." Yudel Mark, the editor of *The Giant Yiddish Dictionary* in Israel, has asked Prof. Susskind of CUNY to ask Singer about a mysterious word in one of his novels. Singer tells him about the word. A

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man rises to denounce *Yugntruf*. Singer tells him to sit down. "What has Singer done for Yiddish writers in Israel?" a woman wants to know. What could he do? He was only there for a short while, a guest. Yiddish education in the U.S., a man points out, should be more American-oriented. Singer agrees. . . .

Very lively. I sit back again, return my pencil to its pocket. We spectators make lousy stenographers. A thought strikes me. This turnout is something of a novelty: Yiddish with an eye cocked for tomorrow.

After intermission, tomorrow takes over. Singer is gone now; five young people have taken his place on stage. A symposium (in Yid-

dish): "Israel and Diaspora: Communities in Conflict?" gets under way. There has been scant official recognition of Yiddish in Israel, the speakers point out, despite the fact that Yiddish was the language and culture of European Jewry for about a thousand years. The speakers resent this. Why doesn't Israel support Russian Jews who want to build their own culture in the USSR? What about Israelis who—it is now reported—feel no kinship with world Jewry? Moyshe Rosenfeld, a young actor, one of the panelists, informs his listeners that in his opinion the Zionist movement did little in defense of Jews during World War II. Mur-

(Continued on page 22)

Nevertheless, the first Jewish U.S. Senator was a southerner, David Yulce, who had changed his name from Levy, and Judah P. Benjamin as Secretary of State, was one of the top leaders of the Confederacy during the Civil War. And, despite some Jewish successes in the South, studies reveal that open anti-Semitism, particularly on a social level, is more accepted in the South than elsewhere in the U.S. Even when elected Mayor of Atlanta in 1969, the Jewish Sam Massell charged some of his opponents with anti-Semitism in the campaign.

The twenty-three articles in the anthology compiled by Dinnerstein and Palsson treat of the Jews of both the old and the new South: their ways of life in the old days and today, and the present problems born of desegregation and a changing South. There are several penetrating articles about specific communities, among them New Orleans, Richmond, and Atlanta that are well worth your attention.

Southern Jews were able to maintain their old character for longer than their compatriots of the North. In large part, they were members of the ruling white aristocracy, but partially circumscribed, a situation they largely accepted. Today, however, they have to face up to the realities of the changing America and they have become more democratic and more Jewish in their commitment. As Albert Vorspan phrased it: "The segregation crisis has shaken southern Jews more severely than any national event since the Civil War. They are torn by a painful dilemma." This timely article is one of the most illuminating in the anthology. But the book also recounts the rather pleasant existence over the years of the affluent Jewish leader in a somewhat pleasant life, even if somewhat marred by an undercurrent of anti-Semitism.

Non-southern Jews, who knew about southern Jewish life in only a vague way, will find that *Jews in the South* is a significant and fascinating introduction to a way of life largely unknown to them.

HENRY W. LEVY

Message from the President

(Continued from page 2)

harder, and do more to fulfill the extra obligations that have arisen with the additional needs of the times. As Pioneer Women, you have

always been in the forefront with your show of loyalty and dedication to Israel and its people, and this is a record that we are truly grateful for. But all this is not enough, for we, who have been blessed with the opportunity to enjoy freedom and the ability to renew our hope at will, must know that there is no price too high to pay for these privileges. Let us help make these available to all our people—and make this season a truly meaningful one. □

Charlotte Stein

A Barrier Is Broken

(Continued from page 7)

patience and fortitude is demanded of us. We stand against the world. When we were attacked, we were blamed. When we waited, we also were blamed. Yet we—Jews everywhere—represent values which today do not exist in many parts of the world. There is a spiritual arteriosclerosis in the world to which we have not succumbed. It is impressive how all of us here recognize it—newcomers and old-timers alike. It is the bond which binds us, a bond which the war brought into the open, which narrowed the gap among all sectors." □

Diary of the Solidarity Mission

(Continued from page 20)

Dov Raviv (ne Rabinowitz) told us first that there are no bad soldiers, only bad commanders.

The C.O. became our guide, showing us the barracks, the camp arsenal, the parade ground, the firing range, the dining room and the synagogue. The ark houses a scroll that was saved from the Germans by Rumanian Jews.

This camp is situated in the place called Beth El (God's place). It's the site where Jacob had his dream of wrestling with the angels.

Lt. Col. Dov Raviv, when asked

about giving up this military position, replied that when he finds the very stone upon which Jacob rested his head, then the camp could be vacated. For those who have been here and have seen this rocky terrain, we know it will not be very soon.

Dear Diary:

Tonight we said all our farewells.

The closing dinner was chaired by Esther Zackler, our immediate past national president of Pioneer Women, who with her husband has just arrived to make her home in Israel.

U.S. Ambassador Kenneth Keating assured us of the support of the United States in establishing a position of security for Israel.

To all those who planned and guided the mission, and especially Blanche Fine who was the real architect of this remarkably coordinated happening—*toda raba!*

Shalom and lehitraot.

Yiddish Buffs Have a Bash

(Continued from page 14)

murs, shouts, *tumel*. The audience is on its feet, arms waving, lips moving, taking sides. Prof. Susskind storms out of the hall, yelling "Liar!" A fellow panelist takes vigorous exception to Rosenfeld's remarks. So does half the audience, which, demanding to be heard, starts lining up by the microphone.

The row is good for another couple of hours. But my story has come to its end. Dissent is nothing new in the Yiddish world—which sports a clamorous list of dreamers, radicals and avant-gardists—and it is encouraging to have it back amongst us youngniks after so long a furlough.

For a moment—with all this yelling—I'd almost forgotten where I was.

Yugntruf resides at 3328 Bainbridge Avenue, Bronx, New York 10467. Your move, fellow Yiddish buffs. □

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