

I.B. Singer, Narrator of Jewish Folkways, Dies

By ERIC PACE

Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose vivid evocations of Jewish life in his native Poland and of his experiences as an immigrant in America won him the Nobel Prize in Literature, died yesterday. He was 87 years old and lived in Surfside, Fla.

Mr. Singer died of several strokes, said his wife, Alma.

Mr. Singer's stories and novels, written in Yiddish, often dealt with his upbringing as a rabbi's son in Warsaw and in a small town in eastern Poland and were redolent of the mysticism of Jewish folklore. But he also wrote about loneliness in drab cafeterias, worldliness in Miami Beach and chance acquaintanceship on the sidewalks of upper Broadway.

Throughout his career, he wrote about human passions and high emotions.

"God gave us so many emotions and such strong ones," he once said in an interview. "Every human being, even if he is an idiot, is a millionaire in emotions."

Even after decades in the United States Mr. Singer kept using Yiddish for the long succession of short stories, novels, memoirs and children's books he wrote.

'Impassioned Narratives'

Most of his fiction first appeared in Yiddish in *The Jewish Daily Forward*, a newspaper in New York City that is now called *The Jewish Forward*. It has had an English-language sister publication since last year.

But Mr. Singer's writing reached a large international public through translations into English and many other languages. Its worldwide appeal was noted in the citation that accompa-



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times, 1984

Isaac Bashevis Singer, who followed Jewish life from old world to new.

nied his Nobel Prize in 1978. The citation praised his "impassioned narratives, which, with roots in a Polish-Jewish cultural tradition, bring universal human conditions to life."

The New York Times critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt wrote that this

was "another way of saying what admirers have always observed about Singer: that he has made of the East European Jew an exemplar of the suffering modern man who has been

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exiled from his divine inheritance."

Mr. Singer's more than 30 books ranged from the novel "Satan in Goray," which came out in 1935, to another novel, "Scum," which was serialized in *The Jewish Daily Forward* in 1967 and published in book form this year. They include the much-praised "A Crown of Feathers" (1973) and other short-story collections. Many of his stories also appeared in *The New Yorker*.

Mr. Singer was a modest man with an unassuming and unliterary style of life: he liked to wear plain business suits and he preferred dairy restaurants to writers' bars. But his life was enlivened by his passion for metaphysics, his eye for a pretty ankle and his occasional flair for the dramatic; when he gave his Nobel Prize lecture in December 1978, he startled the dignitaries in the Stockholm auditorium by breaking into Yiddish.

In awarding him the prize, he said, the Swedish Academy was also honoring "a loshon fun golus, ohn a land; ohn grenitzen, nisht gshitzt fun kein shum meluchoch" — "a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government."

In the speech, a deft summary of what he thought about his work, Mr. Singer also voiced his long-held view that one main duty of the writer was to keep the reader interested.

'An Entertainer Of the Spirit'

"The storyteller of our time, as in any other time, must be an entertainer of the spirit in the full sense of the word, not just a preacher of social and political ideals," he declared, speaking in English.

"Nonetheless, it is also true that the serious writer of our time must be deeply concerned about the problems of his generation." These, he said, included the decline of the power of religion and the weakening of the family.

That being the case, he said, the world had much to learn from the Jews of his childhood world, from "their way of thinking, their way of bringing up children, their finding happiness where others see nothing but misery and humiliation."

Central to that way of life, he said, was the Yiddish language with its "quiet humor and gratitude for every day of life, every crumb of success, each encounter of love." And in a figurative way, he told his international audience, "Yiddish is the wise and humble language of us all, the idiom of the frightened and hopeful humanity."

Mr. Singer was one of several 20th-century Yiddish writers, including his older brother, I. J. Singer, Chaim Grade and Sholem Asch, who carried on the tradition of Mendele Mokher Sforim and other great Yiddish novelists of the 1800's.

Isaac Singer's skill in using the language was a matter of pride with him, so much so, the story goes, that one day in the 30's, when he was a new, low-ranking contributor to *The Jewish Daily Forward*, he flew into a rage when an editor tried to give him advice on writing.

"Don't try to teach me Yiddish!" Mr. Singer shouted. "I know how to write Yiddish!"

A Family Of Rabbis

His pride was understandable, because he came from a learned family;

Isaac Bashevis Singer, 87, Writer of Jewish Life in Poland and America

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his two grandfathers and his father were rabbis, and his father, Pinchos Menachem Singer, wrote books on religious themes.

Isaac Bashevis Singer was born on July 14, 1904, to Bathsheba Zylberman Singer in Radzymin, a flour-milling town 15 miles northeast of Warsaw. When he was 4, his family moved to Warsaw, and his father set up a rabbinical court in the shabby building where they lived.

As a boy, Isaac received a traditional Jewish schooling and spent time with his maternal grandmother in the small town of Bilgoraj, in the countryside of eastern Poland. His parents wanted him to be a rabbi, and he obliged them by enrolling at the Tachkemoni Rabbinical Seminary in Warsaw.

But in his early 20's Mr. Singer made a momentous decision: he would drop his religious studies and become a secular writer. In taking the step, he was greatly influenced by his older brother, whose full name was Israel Joseph Singer.

I. J. Singer, who won fame as the author of "The Brothers Ashkenazi," was a dyed-in-the-wool rationalist. He had been filling Isaac Singer's ears since boyhood with arguments against religious faith. Now, in manhood, I. J. Singer had turned to writing short stories with a strongly secular outlook.

Wanting to follow in his brother's footsteps, Isaac got a foot in the door of the Warsaw literary world by working as a proofreader at Literarishe Bleter, a Yiddish literary magazine.



Bruce Davidson, 1975

Isaac Bashevis Singer feeding pigeons on a street of the Upper West Side, the locale of many of his stories.

First Work Was in Hebrew

Soon he began having book reviews and short stories published. His first work was in Hebrew, but then he made another momentous decision. Finding that ancient tongue confining — "Nobody spoke it where I lived," he recalled — he began writing in Yiddish.

In 1932, Mr. Singer became an editor of the Yiddish literary journal *Globus*, which published his first novel in installments. The work was "Satan in Goray," which drew in part on the Jewish small-town life he had experienced in Bilgoraj. He was also the author of a Yiddish translation of Thomas Mann's "Buddenbrooks."

In 1935, having become alarmed at the growing menace of Nazism and the worsening conditions among Polish Jews, Mr. Singer set sail for the United States, where his brother had settled. At first he was lonely and gloomy about the state of Yiddish in the New World.

"My first impression was that here Yiddish literature was dead," he later recalled. "It took me five years to convince myself that Yiddish is still very much alive."

But he soon made friends, and he began contributing to *The Jewish Daily Forward*, remaining on the staff for more than a decade, beginning in 1935. In 1940, he married Alma Haimann, a stylish émigrée from Germany, and he became a United States citizen in 1943.

It was *The Jewish Daily Forward* that first serialized his next book, "The Family Moskat," which, like "Buddenbrooks," was a sweeping novel of Central European family life; it was about the decline of a well-to-do Jewish family in Poland during the 50 years before World War II. An executive of *The Forward*, Harold Ostroff, recalled in 1990 that over the years all of Mr. Singer's novels first appeared in that newspaper in serial form.

"The Family Moskat" appeared in book form in Yiddish in 1945, dedicated to the memory of I. J. Singer, who had died in 1944. An English translation was published in 1950 and received enthusiastic reviews. In *The New York*

Times, Richard Plant wrote that from its pages "rises a sense of life — boundless, frustrated, but undying."

Credible Characters And Vitality

"The scene he depicts is gone forever," Mr. Plant said, "and his novel may well be one of its monuments. Still, the novel, reminiscent of Turgenev and Balzac, stands because of its narrative qualities, its completely credible characters, its throbbing vitality."

The years that followed passed quickly but productively. In 1957, a short-story collection, "Gimpel the Fool," appeared; in 1960, a novel, "The Magician of Lublin"; in 1961 another short-story collection, "The Spinoza of Market Street."

Mr. Singer's fourth novel, "The Slave," an allegory about a pious Jewish teacher in 17th-century Poland, came out in 1962, and was praised by Orville Prescott in *The Times* as "a sort of Jewish 'Pilgrim's Progress,'" that was "nobly conceived and well written."

When another collection of Singer stories, "Short Friday," was published in 1964, Mr. Prescott said, "His stories sound as if they were being told by the village storyteller" and called him "a natural storyteller who likes to cloak his moral earnestness in a garment of folk simplicity."

Two years later, in a volume of reminiscences entitled "In My Father's Court," Mr. Singer wrote about Jewish life in Eastern Europe during his childhood and recalled how his own sensibilities and intellect had developed.

Two linked novels, "The Manor" and "The Estate," and another story collection, "The Seance," came out during the next three years, and in 1970 there appeared "A Friend of Kafka," another story collection. "Enemies: A Love Story," which was the first of Mr. Singer's novels to be set in the United States, came out in 1970. It was about

Jewish survivors of the Holocaust who felt guilty about having survived.

Splendor, Wit and Mischief

Mr. Singer's 1973 collection, "A Crown of Feathers," won particularly high praise. Writing in *The Times Book Review*, Alfred Kazin called him "an extraordinary writer," and said, "This new collection of stories, like so much that he writes, represents the most delicate imaginative splendor, wit, mischief and, not least, the now unbelievable life that Jews once lived in Poland."

The 1976 collection "Passions" included a number of stories that openly described Mr. Singer's experiences as a middle-aged writer, and the 1978 novel "Shosha" incorporated aspects of his life: refugee, rabbi's son, writer for children and journalist.

In an author's note in the 1979 collection "Old Love," Mr. Singer observed: "The love of the old and the middle-aged is a theme that is recurring more and more in my works of fiction. Literature has neglected the old and their emotions. The novelists never told us that in love, as in other matters, the young are just beginners and that the art of loving matures with age and experience."

By then Mr. Singer, though known for thriftiness, was rich in fame and comfortably well off in worldly goods. Dressed in his somber suits, he had long since become a familiar figure in various spots around New York: feeding the pigeons near his apartment, eating in his favorite vegetarian cafeterias and passing the time of day at *The Jewish Daily Forward's* East Side offices, where he startled friends now and then by doing some writing on a pad while he was talking with them.

In his novels as well as in his stories, Mr. Singer avoided what he regarded as the dangers of intellectualism. "The very essence of literature is the war between emotion and intellect," he told

an interviewer. "When literature becomes too intellectual — when it begins to ignore the passions, the emotions — it becomes sterile, silly and actually without any substance."

Betrayal And Other Evils

Another perennial theme in Mr. Singer's fiction is betrayal of one kind or another, a subject that fascinated him. "I would say a great part of human history is a history of self-betrayal and betrayal of others," he said in the late '70's. In his fiction, Mr. Singer looked unblinkingly at betrayal and many other evils, and in conversation would express great admiration for Schopenhauer, the gloomy 19th-century German philosopher.

"What I admire in Schopenhauer is his courage to be a pessimist," Mr. Singer once said. "Because most of the philosophers try, one way or another, to paint an orderly universe and to give people hopes which are false and nothing more than wishful thinking. Schopenhauer had the rare courage to say that we are living in a world of evil."

Nonetheless, Mr. Singer maintained a belief in God, although, he noted, "I have my doubts about revelation; I have no proof whatever that God reveals Himself or tells us how to behave. But since I believe in God's existence and since God created man and formed his brain, I believe also that there must be something of the divine in men's ideas about Him — even if they are far from being adequate."

Mr. Singer said his own faith fluctuated:

"I have moments when I almost deny God," he said. "But I also have moments of exultation. When I'm in trouble, I pray. In spite of the fact that I pray to God, I also sin against God."

"Religion is not a simple thing, and neither is love. You can love a woman and you can betray her. You can love her, quarrel with her and hate her. Everything in us is human."

The Comic Side Of Humanity

In humanity, as Mr. Singer perceived it, there was much that was deeply comic. Even his own vegetarianism he saw in a humorous light; it was, he explained, "not for my health, but for the health of the chickens."

Another abiding theme in his fiction was human sexuality, which was only natural, because, as he said in an interview:

"In sex and in love, human character is revealed more than anywhere else. Let's say a man can play a very strong man — a big man, a dictator. But in sex he may become reduced to a child or to an imp."

Mr. Singer was particularly fond of talking, joking and writing about the contradictions in the character of his fellow Jewish intellectuals. "The intellectual Jew is so restless that he is almost everything simultaneously," he once observed.

Yet Mr. Singer did not think of him-

"When I sit down to write a story, I'm not saying to myself I'm going to write a Jewish story. Just like when a Frenchman builds a house in France, he doesn't say he's going to build a French house. He's going to build a house for his wife and children, a convenient house. Since it's built in France, it comes out French."

"When I sit down to write a story, I will write the kind of stories which I write. It's true that since I know the Jewish people best and since I know the Yiddish language best, so my heroes, the people of my stories, are always Jewish and speak Yiddish. I am at home with these people. But just the same, I'm not just writing about them because they speak Yiddish and are Jewish. I'm interested in the same things you are interested in and the Japanese are interested in — in love, and in treachery, and in hopes and in disappointments."

Declined to Return To Polish Homeland

Mr. Singer chose not to revisit his Polish homeland after World War II and set down his reasons in 1980, in declining a Polish literary group's invitation to a writers' gathering in Warsaw:

"It would be for me a terrible strain to see Poland without my people, without those who were close to me and who have perished for sins they have never committed. I just don't have the strength to go through this ordeal at the present time and in my advanced age."

"I am afraid I will have to continue to write about the Poland that I remember. After all, literature is about the past."

Yet opinions varied as to the degree of historicity in Mr. Singer's fiction. The author Cynthia Ozick, reviewing "The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer" in *The Times* in 1982, said it was a misapprehension to view him as "the recorder of a lost world, the preserver of a vanished sociology."

"Singer is an artist and transcendent inventor, not a curator," she went on, arguing that "the Jewish townlets that truly were" in the Europe of the past "are only seeds for his febrile conflagrations."

Though often somber, Mr. Singer sometimes took a downright light-hearted view of life, and of his own mortality. Once, at a dinner party, after he had become famous, he noticed that other guests stared at him when he dipped hungrily into his soup the instant it was served.

"In the next life I will be a pig," he said, to general laughter.

"And the other animals will ask me what I was in the previous life," he went on. "I will tell them I was a writer, and they will say, 'That's what all the pigs claim.'"

Book Award And Other Honors

Mr. Singer won a National Book Award in 1970 for one of his children's books, "A Day of Pleasure," which was a memoir of his boyhood days in Warsaw. He won another National Book Award in 1974 in the adult-fiction category for "A Crown of Feathers." Among his other honors was the highest award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, its Gold Medal, in 1989.

Some of his writings were adapted for stage and screen, with mixed results. A short story was the basis for a play, "Tebele and Her Demon," by Mr. Singer and Eve Friedman, which opened in 1979 at the Brooks Atkinson Theater and closed after two dozen performances. Written for the stage, "A Play for the Devil" won praise when it was performed Off Broadway in 1984.

The 1983 Hollywood musical "Yentl," based on Mr. Singer's story "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy," and starring Barbra Streisand, got mixed reviews including a negative reaction from Mr. Singer himself. "I did not find artistic merit, neither in the adaptation, nor in the directing," he wrote in 1984. "There was too much singing, much too much."

A 1972 novel by Mr. Singer, "Enemies, a Love Story," had a happier fate as a 1989 movie with the same title, directed and produced by Paul Mazursky. Janet Maslin, in *The Times*, called it a "deeply felt, fiercely evocative adaption" of the "brilliantly enigmatic novel" about Holocaust survivors in the New York of 1949.

In addition to his wife, he is survived by a son from an earlier marriage, Israel Zamir, of Gilboa, Israel, a writer and translator, and four grandchildren.

More obituaries appear on following page.