

# A "Master of Language, Second to None"

**CONVERSATIONS WITH ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER, by Isaac Bashevis Singer & Richard Gurgin. Doubleday, N.Y. 1985. 178 pages \$15.95.**

**Reviewed by ISIDORE HAIBLUM**

In 1978, Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the only Yiddish writer ever to do so. His stories, novels, memoirs, essays, children's books and plays have been translated into over 60 languages—surely some kind of a record—and in October, as the author strode toward his 81st birthday, another of his marvelous tales appeared in the pages of the famed *New Yorker* magazine. For his English readers it was yet another demonstration that Singer's creative energy, amazingly, remains undiminished. His Yiddish readers, of course, know this from week to week.

In bygone years, Singer's work always appeared, hot off his ancient Yiddish typewriter, in the *Jewish Daily Forward*; it was serialized every Thursday and Friday. Singer has often attributed his narrative drive, the suspense he conjures up in his stories and novels, to the necessity of keeping his readers interested. He is, in fact, the only major American author whose work is still regularly first published in serial form.

In these days, *The Forward* has turned weekly and its circulation has plummeted from a quarter of a million in the early part of this century, to about 25,000. But every week, except for four weeks during the summer months, a new installment of Singer's latest work-in-progress hits the press. His current opus, a long novel, is called *The Way Home*. In *Conversations With Isaac Bashevis Singer*, by Singer and the English Professor Richard Burgin, the author says of this work, "It is again the story of a penitent, only enlarged, and I hope also enriched. *The Penitent* [a previous Singer short novel] concentrated on his penance, but I wrote little about the protagonist's sins. In this book I concentrated on both his sinful life and the way he left it behind."

#### Modern & Orthodox

The views of the penitent in Singer's new novel are those of the author's pious parents. And while Isaac Singer himself is a thoroughly modern man who will discuss Tolstoy, Kant, Freud, Gogol, Spinoza, Marx, Malthus and Schopenhauer, with whom he has a special affinity, at the drop of a hat, *Conversations* leaves little doubt that the modern and orthodox continue—at least partially—to grapple in the author's heart.

There is no guarantee, incidentally, that *The Way Home* will ac-

tually see print in English. The author must first deem it worthy. And he has often proved his own toughest critic. The back issues of the *Forward* teem with Singer's untranslated works. He has called the Yiddish paper his laboratory, a place where he can take chances and experiment. When the experiments fail, they are discarded. "I don't have these pieces translated," he tells us in *Conversations*, "I let them stay in Yiddish, and I hope that no one is going to translate them after my death."

So prolific is this author that along with the rejects, there are still works, some written years ago, waiting for translation. Among these—I have been told by Singer himself—is an underworld novel called *Scum*. In *Conversations* Singer says, "As a rule I hate criminals, but somehow I can forgive those I knew when I was young because I saw the circumstances under which these creatures were brought up. It's easier for me to think with some tolerance about these law-breakers of former times than about those of today."

*(Continued on page 18, col. 1)*

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**ISIDORE HAIBLUM** is the author of 11 books which have been translated into five languages, including Hebrew.

## A "Master of Language"

(Continued from page 17)

Singer's Yiddish audience gets another bonus aside from the privilege of reading his unknown output. They are exposed to a master of language, second to none. Especially in those tales set in the old country, Singer's Yiddish gleams with a luster unequalled by any of his contemporaries. The prose shimmers with idioms, races breathlessly ahead as in no other Yiddish writing, is all aglitter with a remarkable descriptive prowess. And works such as *Scum* are laced with wonderful underworld slang. As fewer and fewer of Singer's critics know Yiddish, some of this is becoming a very well kept secret. His books in other languages are all translated from the English versions, whose quality is generally first rate. In addition, many of his works in English have been re-edited and rewritten by the author himself, and thus vastly improved. Yet, as Singer has often acknowledged, *something* is lost. And, as no standard edition of Singer's Yiddish works exists, the loss may be permanent.

Richard Burgin, who interviewed Singer for *Conversations*, knows no Yiddish. And this is somewhat of a drawback as a small *something* is

again lost. Still, Burgin skillfully leads the way in a lively discussion of Singer's life, philosophy, tastes and prejudices, which is fascinating in its own right, and also serves as a splendid backdrop to Singer's work.

We find out that Singer considers his years in Warsaw — between 1908 and 1917 — his most important ones: "I keep going back to 10 Krochmalna Street in my writing. I remember every little corner and every person there. I say to myself that just as other people are digging gold which God has created billions of years ago, my literary gold mine is this street. I keep on returning to it with the feeling that there are still treasures which I haven't used up."

### Invaluable Recollections

About a pair of classics, Singer says: "It is the custom in this country always to mention Kafka and Dostoyevsky in one breath as if they were Siamese twins. . . . The truth is Dostoyevsky was a first class genius who will most probably last much longer than Kafka."

About Yiddish in Israel: "I'm happy to say that in Israel now . . .

they are trying to turn back, to recognize Yiddish and to realize how important it was. After the Balfour Declaration, when there was a meeting in Israel and they spoke Yiddish, fanatics came in and beat up the audience or they tore up Yiddish books. They did all kinds of brutal things. Thank God, this time is past."

On Chekhov: "He is my favorite writer of short stories, but a play where people sit and express moods is not really theatre."

On religion: "I would say that modern man and especially young men are unhappy because of a lack of religion, and I don't mean the organized religions as much as the belief in higher powers."

And about his own work: "All my writing is actually a memoir — a writer gets all of his material from his life. From the people he meets. So even if I write about other people it is a part of my memoirs one way or another."

Because Isaac Bashevis Singer

uses his own life so artfully in his work, it would have been useful to know more about the Yiddish milieu which nurtured him. Singer is, after all, one of our greatest Yiddish experts; his recollections and opinions are invaluable. He himself has written about the Yiddish world often, but a good deal of material still awaits translation. Till then we have Singer's own memoirs in English, along with this fine new book to delight and inform us.



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