

▶ THE ARTS

Exposing myths of Yiddish storytelling

by Sanford Pinsker

A BRIDGE OF LONGING: THE LOST ART OF YIDDISH STORYTELLING. By David G. Roskies. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. 419 pages. \$37.50.

For most readers, the stories of Sholem Aleichem are a treasure. They are touchstones of a world lost to emigration and later to the night and fog of the Holocaust. Tevye, in short, is seen as synonymous with the shtetl in which our grandparents — or now, great-grandparents — once lived.

The “bad news” that David G. Roskies delivers is that it ain’t necessarily so. For what such Yiddish writers as Sholem Aleichem, Y. L. Peretz, Itzik Manger and I. B. Singer did was appropriate folkloric material through a process Roskies, professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City, calls “creative betrayal.” The result was copies that later generations came to regard as the originals.

The “good news” is these secular writers who, as Roskies puts it, “had long since slammed the gates of the ‘ghetto’ behind them — on the synagogue and the study house, on the shtetl and its whole mythic landscape —” preserved that world through the sheer power of their stories.

Roskies, in effect, is asking whether life imitates art, or if art imitates life. Placed in quite another setting, it would be akin to wondering whether the lingo of gangsters influenced actors like James

Cagney and Humphrey Bogart; or if gangsters came to talk this way after seeing certain Warner Brothers films. For Roskies, much that we regard as traditional Yiddish culture was the product of artists with little direct exposure to that tradition.

Sholem Aleichem not only spent his time in Kiev, a city conspicuous for its lack of Jews, but was also quite well off. Indeed, he was very likely to insist on speaking Russian, rather than Yiddish, should one try to engage him in conversation.

Moreover, Roskies takes no small delight in pointing out that “‘Afn Pripetshik,’ the perennial Yiddish favorite, a song about the Hebrew teacher inducting his young charges into the secrets and sorrows of the alphabet, was the work of a lawyer from Kiev named Mark Warshawski. As Sholem Aleichem’s protege, he performed folksongs wearing top hat and tails at Zionist fundraisers. The Jewish alphabet loomed so large in Warshawski’s folk imagination because he himself had forgotten how to use it.”

A Bridge of Longing, then, is the twin story of loss and redemption, of how the most important Yiddish writers turned folk material on its head (one thinks, for example, of what Y. L. Peretz did to the secret saint in his story “Bontsha the Silent”) and in the process, creat-

ed products that would outlive the collapse of cultural revolution.

But intriguing as Roskies’ thesis is (it will surely shake up conventional Yiddish scholarship), common readers should be forewarned: *A Bridge of Longing* is filled with erudition and not a few stretches where its sentences are perhaps thicker, more “academic” than they need to be. For those who know the difference between Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye stories and *Fiddler on the Roof*, the assets of this book outweigh its liabilities. And for those who read Sholem Aleichem in Yiddish and who recognize names such as Isaac Meir Dick and Der Nister, I would simply say that *A Bridge of Longing* is essential reading. ■

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