



Books

By Sylvia Rothchild

Reviewing the great storytellers

A Bridge of Longing, by David G. Roskies, Harvard University Press, 407 pages, \$37.50.

A Bridge of Longing, subtitled "The lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling," is a fascinating tale about 200 years of rebellion, loss and return. Jewish literary revolutionaries tried to synthesize the old and the new and transformed tradition into folklore.

Roskies begins his story in the first decade of the 19th century, when male Jews of central and eastern Europe still prayed three times a day and went back to the study-house on Sabbaths and holidays to hear the stories of itinerant preachers. He follows the stories based on the Bible and Talmud through all their incarnations, from Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav to I.L. Peretz to Sholom Aleichem, I.M. Dik, der Nister, Abraham Sutzkever, all the way to Isaac Bashevis Singer and other modern writers who try to retrieve the folklore and the traditions that have been lost to modern Jews.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810) told stories to awaken Jews from their sleep and tempt them back to their discarded past. Roskies describes them as "pious tales for political subversion." What is surprising, however, is that he told Grimm's Fairy Tales and other non-Jewish stories in Yiddish, giving them a new slant to attract women readers.

He wrote his heretical stories anonymously in Yiddish, preached the need for ethical conduct and an end to arranged marriages. He favored well-rounded education for children. He wanted to get women out of the marketplace and back into their homes and men out of the study halls to take their place as wage earners. The books were printed to resemble religious books. The Enlighteners added a pious title page and epilogue to help them pass.

Sholom Aleichem was described as "the mythologist of the mundane." Another kind of con artist, he spent four hours a day as a crackerjack stock broker in Kiev. From 5 p.m. to 3 in the morning, he was a writer creating the comic tragic tales that earned him the affection of readers in London, New York, Odessa and all Jewish towns in Poland. Like Peretz, he no longer cherished the belief system of Judaism but used the experiences of his childhood to describe the world he didn't live in. Thanks to his wife Olga, who had a dental office in their home, he had permission to live in Kiev, a city restricted to Jews. He wrote about impoverished Teyve, while living in a well-appointed home with Gobelins, Chinese porcelain and a grand piano. He began by trying to modernize and raise Jewish culture but came to identify with the old world types he wrote about.

Yiddish writers thrived between the two world wars when tradition

and modernity were in open competition. The more Jews were excluded from mainstream Polish and Soviet life, the more important Yiddish culture became. Der Nister (Pinkes Kahanovitch) was one of a community of Russian Jewish writers in Berlin. In 1923 he went back to Russia, believing that the state would keep its promise to support Yiddish culture. He was one of many Jewish writers killed in the purges. Itzik Manger, in Warsaw in 1923, was a poet for the people, a folk bard who "put Jewish parody, drama and the Bible back on the map."

Singer, the Yiddish writer most familiar to modern readers who read him in English, shares with those before him the vocabulary of Yiddishkeit in which he didn't believe. The others wrote for Yiddish readers and enjoyed the public's response to their work. They were born into Jewish life, rebelled against the traditional faith and believed redemption could be wrought by human hands.

Singer believed in the imposition of a moral order from above because society was too corrupt to survive without it. A master cynic, Singer declared God indifferent to what Jews do. He described Jews, egged on by the devil, trading God for man. He took visions of messianic faith and turned them into horrifying visions of apocalypse. He wrote stories about men and

women "sinning beyond their capabilities." "If the devil and hell exist," said Singer, "then God too must exist."

It is impossible to know what Singer really believed. He often used a demon for a protagonist. He tested the limits of realism in his stories, refashioned the past and falsified history with impunity. He was a modern writer, amoral, not trying to save Jews, Yiddish culture or the Yiddish language. He did not believe Yiddish as a secular language had a future. He often wrote trashy novels, but also wrote *The Family Moskat*, *Gimpel the Fool*, *Spinoza of Market Street*, *The Slave* and other remarkable tales in which his characters reject evil and skepticism and achieve goodness.

Roskies, professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary, has written a wonderful overview of the work of Yiddish storytellers. He shows how they re-invented the past in their own image, "creating a cultural artifact that can be mistaken for the real thing." The stories and storytellers, however, are all we have of a world that is gone. To know what they are about and how and why they were written is essential for understanding our recent history and our present struggles. *A Bridge of Longing* leads us back to the folk tradition and the piety of the world before it.