

f Commons. It is the story of a life that was as full outside politics as it was inside and it gives us a unique insight into the factors which made him what he was and is.

The book begins with an account of the arrival of his father, as a very poor immigrant, in East London at the end of the last century. What a story of struggle that was, for him and the many thousands who followed the same route to escape from the pogroms in Tsarist Russia. Those early Jewish communities had absolutely nothing to start their new life with except the limited support from others who had come before, their own determination and culture. My own grandfather, John Benn, was elected as Liberal MP in 1892 and he wrote most movingly of the conditions in Lower Hamlets at that time, which was the driving force of his own political work; and Mik's account brought it all back.

It was to this background that two of Mik's own political passions can be traced—his commitment to the establishment of a home for the Jews in Israel and his bitter opposition to all forms of racism, which plagued the later immigrants from the West Indies who also suffered from discrimination and the Fascists.

All socialists are made so by experience and that experience leads them to think more deeply about the circumstances that have brought it about. So it was with Mik. He describes his visit to a household which had, on the mantelpiece, a cup which they called the "Umbrella Cup" into which every spare penny was carefully put away against some "Rainy Day" when they might need it. It was from reflecting on that that he came to read Tawney whose simple socialism helped to explain what was happening and how it could be put right.

Thus the 1945 Labour Government which introduced the Welfare State was, for Mik, the collective answer to the need for an "Umbrella Cup". These ideas recur in the Epilogue to the book in which he comments on the selfish philosophy that has been preached during the Thatcher years which he sees as having brought back so many of the worst features of the Victorian era into which his father was catapulted.

Yet, despite the hard times which he went through, the book is absolute-

ly free from any personal bitterness. Though he was often engaged in the fiercest of controversy he writes with generosity of some of those with whom he found himself in opposition.

Despite its title, this book is not a memoir confined to the arena of party controversy. We hear a great deal about Mik's work as a business consultant, at which he excelled and as a result of which he was able to devise the famous Reading system that has been used ever since in all Labour election campaigns—now being given a new lease of life as computers come into use—a system that introduced the most modern methods of record-keeping into canvassing and the even harder task of seeing that those who promise to vote actually do so.

I have left the account of his work as a leading figure on the left of the Labour Party until last because, without knowing something of his background and faith, it may not make much sense to those who do not remember the Bevanites and the battles they fought against the right wing leadership of the time. Mik was at the very centre of those battles and it was due to him, and those who fought alongside him, that the party was able to put forward a radical policy in 1964 and convert it into a huge majority less than two years later.

But the story is told in a reflective way and is in no sense either a diary (he has no time for those who keep them) nor is it a self-justifying memoir of the kind which is expected of every major figure when they finally retire. Instead it offers an insight into the mood and atmosphere of the period which may prove to convey what actually occurred more accurately than most other accounts that will be available. As such, it should be regarded as a major source book by those who come to write about those years.

It is generally supposed that the main test by which a political life should be judged is whether the person concerned became a Minister and which offices he or she held. Certainly Mik would have been a marvellous Minister in almost any department and a huge asset in any Labour Government; but no Labour Prime Minister had the sense to appoint him. He may have been secretly disappointed that that opportunity never came his way. But I can think of few MPs or Ministers who have had such a pro-

longed and beneficial influence on the course of our political life as Mik has had as a backbencher, as an active member of the Labour Party, serving for many years on its National Executive and as Chair of the party at three successive Conferences.

Over and above all else, he is a wise and kindly friend to many people who think of him with affection and look forward to the chance of seeing him, whenever it occurs.

Mik was one of the bogeymen of the press in the fifties. But I would guess that he is now seen by all of us as Fenner Brockway was—and we all hope that he will live as long to inspire us as Fenner did. □

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## LOST IN THE FIELDS

Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska

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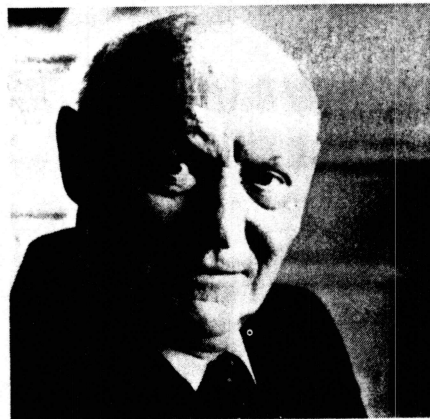
### THE KING OF THE FIELDS

by Isaac Bashevis Singer  
(New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux,  
1988, \$18.95)

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What turn would the history of the world have taken if Judaism, by some miracle, had been successfully implanted in eastern Europe or, which seems even more miraculous, coexisted there harmoniously with Christianity?

One cannot resist such apparently outrageous historical speculations while reading the latest novel by Isaac Bashevis Singer. The Yiddish original *Der Kenig fun di Felder* was serialized, like most of Singer's novels, in the *Jewish Daily Forward*; but the English version is also an original having been



translated by the author himself.

The title, vaguely reminiscent of *Lord of the Flies*, is deciphered at the beginning of the book: the king of the fields is a king of Poles, "because in their language *pola* meant field".

In his previous historical fiction Singer gives a kind of survey of Polish history starting with the Chmielnicki massacres in *Satan in Goray* and ending with the shadows of the Holocaust in *Enemies*. In *King of the Fields* he goes much further back, as far as pre-Christian Poland.

Although inspiring historical speculations, the novel is by no means a reconstruction of historical events. One is tempted to read it as a parable, a new version of Singer's story for children *Joseph and Koza or the Sacrifice to the Vistula*. While the children's story is charming and, typically of its genre, has a happy ending, the adult version is more of a nightmare, evoking the grimmest of Teutonic tales. With its vivid descriptions of ancient rituals, it is one more journey into the "heart of darkness", a tale of primitive people haunted by Baba Yagas and werewolves. The tribe of Poles conquers the tribe of Lesniks, the forest dwellers, harnessing them to agriculture and thus forcing them one step up on the ladder of civilization. But progress does not mean less violence since, as we have learnt from Singer before, man is basically cruel and driven by the basest of instincts.

Ben Dosa, a Babylonian Jew, is brought to the pagans as a messenger of a still higher civilization, both material and spiritual. He makes them shoes and, while writing down Polish words in Hebrew letters, teaches them the principles of Judaism. His efforts are appreciated by most of the pagans but have to be stopped with the arrival of another messenger, of Christianity this time. Bishop Mieczyslaw, arriving on a white horse, impresses the pagans more than the little shoemaker, the more so that his dogmas seem less strict and easier to follow, not requiring as much self-control and sacrifice as those of Ben Dosa's.

In this unusual novel the past is constantly intermingled with the present. The characters display some very modern ideas, including feminism and vegetarianism; and Nosek, one of the

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wisest and most sensitive of the pagans, is a homosexual. Well-known Singer obsessions find an even better context for themselves in the wild world than they did in somewhat more civilized milieus of pre-war Warsaw and post-war New York. The main protagonist, Cybula, sexually promiscuous, sharing his bed (or rather a pile of hides) with his wife and mother-in-law, fantasizing about a liaison with his own daughter, not to mention some minor conquests, becomes a historical prototype of Yasha Mazur, Asa Heshel Bannet and the author himself as he presents his colourful past in his memoirs (which have to be taken with a grain of salt).

Singer, therefore, transfers the features typical so far of his Jewish protagonists on a non-Jewish character. In his other novels Polish characters appear mainly in the background; here historic necessity takes them to the fore. Due to this they are less stereotypical, except for Krol Rudy, the king of the fields himself, who is a stereotype of a Polish aristocrat familiar to us not only from Singer but from other Jewish, and not only Jewish, writers.

What seems outrageous as a speculation acquires a profound significance when we dig deeper into what constitutes the heart of the novel's darkness: the beginning of the antagonism between Judaism and Christianity. Bishop Mieczyslaw explains to the pagans:

"Before God sent his son, all the nations worshipped idols. . . . But when they saw the truth, many of them destroyed the altars they used for human sacrifices, expelled the whores and false prophets from their temples, and smashed their idols. One nation alone remained headstrong and rebellious—the Jews."

"Did Ben Dosa kill God?" Cybula asked.

"Not he himself. His people did."

"When did they kill God?"

"Oh, a long time ago. Several hundreds of years."

"Is Ben Dosa so old?"

"No, but he is descended from their corrupt seed."

Symbolically, a seed of hatred is planted which will later lead to tragedies, the more absurd and ironic in that both religions come from the same source. Their basic similarity is

perceived by Nosek who responds to the bishop's preaching by saying that Ben Dosa had taught them more or less the same.

But not only the Christian side is responsible for the future darkness; Ben Dosa's attitude toward Christianity is flavoured with hatred and contempt:

The truth is that Joshua was the son of a carpenter named Joseph and his wife Miriam. When he grew into manhood he proclaimed himself God's son. The miracles he performed he performed not with God's help but with magic. He denied the Torah and its commandments. He is roasting in the fires of hell.

And again the pagan Cybula is the voice of natural wisdom when he says: "How do you know that you are right and the bishop is wrong? Perhaps the opposite is true?"

Comparing *The King of the Fields* with *Joseph and Koza* one cannot resist the feeling that the story for children is better constructed than the novel. Proof perhaps of the opinion often expressed by critics that Singer is a better story-teller than a novelist? Or maybe just an impression of a child hidden in the adult reader, the child who yearns for a closed ending instead of being left suspended in the air. And Singer leaves us together with Cybula in the middle of the unknown, just as he left Yasha Mazur in a half-hearted penitence, Herman Broder among the demons of New York, and himself, "lost in America, lost forever". □

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## "YOU CAN'T TRUST ANY BOCHE AT ANY TIME"

Miriam Kochan

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THE INTERNMENT OF ALIENS  
by François Lafitte  
(London: Libris, 1988, £14.95)

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In May 1940, the government embarked on a policy of interning

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MIRIAM KOCHAN is a writer and translator. She has written two works of oral history, *Prisoners of England* and *Britain's Internees in the Second World War*.