

This winter (1934) I'd like to go to India.

Such an inspiration was rare in a German Lutheran pastor. It was far ahead of its time and it underscores a dimension of Bonhoeffer's character seldom recognized. Not only was he a theologian and a politician; he was also a mystic who felt at home in a monastery as well as in an ashram.

Bonhoeffer's *Letters from Prison* remarkably resembles Rosa Luxemburg's *Letters from Prison* in many ways. One is struck by the inner relationship of the Jewish Communist and the Prussian pastor, by the amazing parallels of thought and feeling, and of their comparable fates: both

formally imprisoned for their obstruction of German war efforts, both convinced pacifists and internationalists, yet both with such a great love for Germany, its woods, meadows and lakes, its literature and language (which they commanded outstandingly), and, above all, its music. They both came to a violent end—the one battered to death, the other hanged—by their own countrymen to whom their challenge had become unbearable and dangerous. The thoughts, sufferings and hopes of Rosa Luxemburg and Dietrich Bonhoeffer often converged, and we would do well to grasp the strength of their commitment to the vision of a world unborn.

"The Riddle," is tormented by sexual desire for his wife Nechele—"He had lusted after Nechele on her unclean days, had unwittingly touched her with pleasure"—and the sure knowledge of its sinfulness: " 'Oh, I deserve to be scourged with iron rods,' he moans to himself." Nechele runs off with Bolek, son of the pig butcher, on Yom Kippur eve; they drive through the market place as Oyzer-Davidl prays in *shul*. He is given the news and Singer tells us, "One of his eyes seemed to weep, the other to laugh."

In "Something Is There," Rabbi Nechemia from Bechev quarrels with the Creator; he sees injustice everywhere and sets out for Warsaw in search of secular wisdom. He tells God, "Enough is enough," but in the big city, undergoes a series of painful confrontations; he is beset by even greater illogic. He returns home to tell his sister-in-law:

"The whole world worships idols . . . they invent gods and they serve them."

"The Jews also?"

"Everybody . . ."

The rabbi lay down on his bed . . . A light he never knew was there flickered in his brain . . . After a time, the rabbi lifted an eyelid. The candle had burned out. A predawn moon, jagged and dimmed by fog, shone through the window. In the east, the sky reddened. "Something is

Bashevis Singer at His Best

■ *A Friend of Kafka*. By Isaac Bashevis Singer. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$6.95.

Reviewed by

Isidore Haiblum

THE STORIES UNWIND WITH DAZZLING swiftness; not a wasted motion or a false note can be detected. Few modern writers match his narrative pace; his speed is a sort of anachronism that has all the qualities of innovation; his insistence on storytelling is almost a novelty among serious contemporary writers. Yet his literary antecedents clearly reach back to the High Renaissance. The *Maase Bukh* (1541?), a collection of more than 250 Yiddish tales, mostly Talmudic but with a scattering of European folk elements, was a favorite of those days and in its opening paragraphs, general compactness and narrative drive, there are striking similarities to the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer. A reader of yore would have scant difficulty in noting the kinship; it is not there by accident. Singer is a man who has totally imbibed the last thousand years of diaspora experience; its subtlest nuances have become part of his psyche.

But Singer and his mythical reader of long ago would, after an initial burst of recognition, part company. For Singer is almost shocking in his modernism. An incisive psychological awareness permeates his pages, touches even the minor characters; he has an uncanny instinct for unearthing the

personal or social lie. Singer is completely unsparing of self and others. The ancient pietistic certainties are gone—in their place we find the confusions of modern man.

IT IS THIS merging of the modern and traditional, the specific and the universal, that is Singer's glory. *A Friend of Kafka*, a volume of 21 short stories, his fifth English collection, reveals him at his best.

Oyzer-Davidl, the tiny Hasid, in

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ISIDORE HAIBLUM is a freelance writer of fiction and criticism.

there," the rabbi murmured.

A word, a phrase, an image and Singer suggests the dilemma, the ambiguity of modern man—his inexplicable drift through a world of reason and unreason, in quest of the elusive and unattainable.

So in "Schloimele" we have a beat up entrepreneur who continually lies to himself in his attempts to come to grips with the world, and in the "Blasphemer," a man who, to his

ruin, will abide lies from no one, not even God.

So Professor Vladislav Eibeschutz, on the eve of World War II in Poland (in "Pigeons"):

"The street was too narrow for this great flock of birds. 'The poor things are hungry,' Professor Eibeschutz muttered to himself. He knew full well that his feelings could not solve their problems. The more you fed them, the more they multiplied. . . . In the

long run, no one can outsmart the laws of nature. But neither could the Professor let these creatures die." And when the Professor expires in a foretaste of the Holocaust, pigeons rise to accompany the hearse.

A MULTIPLICITY of characters are on view in these pages: Jacques Kohn, of the title story, an unemployed aging ex-actor whose mind is alive with strange and wonderful reminiscences; the scholar Dr. Alexander Walden, who is inadvertently done in by a joke; the poetess Sonya Lopata through whose eyes we see the decline of an Argentinian Jewish colony; Altela, who makes wandering a way of life; and Adele, who does the same for primping. It is a remarkable aspect of Singer's art that it has lost none of its sense of wonder, that it has remained undiminished by the years.

The translations from the Yiddish are uniformly excellent, smooth, colloquial and highly readable. "The Cafeteria" or "The Mentor," stories with a New York or Israeli setting, lose little. Others, of a more traditional nature, inevitably lose more. But the heart and spirit of these tales is never lost.

There is humor here, there is wisdom, there is despair. And behind it all, the old necromancer pulling the strings and—to borrow a phrase—telling it like it is.

An Appeal to American Jews from Pablo Casals

Dear Friend:

DO YOU KNOW that 16,000 Spanish refugees died in Nazi concentration camps, along with their Jewish brothers, having chosen to fight Hitler? (8,000 died in Mauthausen alone!) They were victimized by the Nazis, forced into slave-labor battalions or deported to Dachau, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen . . .

DO YOU KNOW that thousands of these Spanish refugees were fighting for the Allied forces against the Nazis having made common cause with the Jews and other anti-fascists?

DO YOU KNOW that there was hardly a resistance group in France, in which the Spanish refugees did not take part? (1,500 were shot by the Gestapo.)

Thirty years ago a half-million Spanish Republicans struggled across the Pyrenees to escape living under Fascism. Of these, 70,000 still live in France. Because of broken health, crippling war wounds, death of the breadwinner, old age, chronic illnesses—this pitiful remnant of those who never compromised with fascism, *ten thousand human beings in all, desperately need our help*. Only 4,700 are being helped today.

The Jewish people have always honored their moral obligations. This is an historic opportunity to think of the facts stated above. We now call on your good will and sense of reciprocity to help us raise the \$150,000 additional needed this year. A little more than \$30 per person spells the difference between dignity and a sense of abandonment for these forgotten exiles.

The work of Spanish Refugee Aid has gone on now for sixteen years. It has helped with food and clothing, assistance to hospitalized invalids and the chronically ill, a warm place for the aged to gather and receive food packages, and scholarships for the children of Spanish Republicans.

Remember them and be your brother's keeper.

Thanking you in advance with all my heart.

Pablo Casals

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