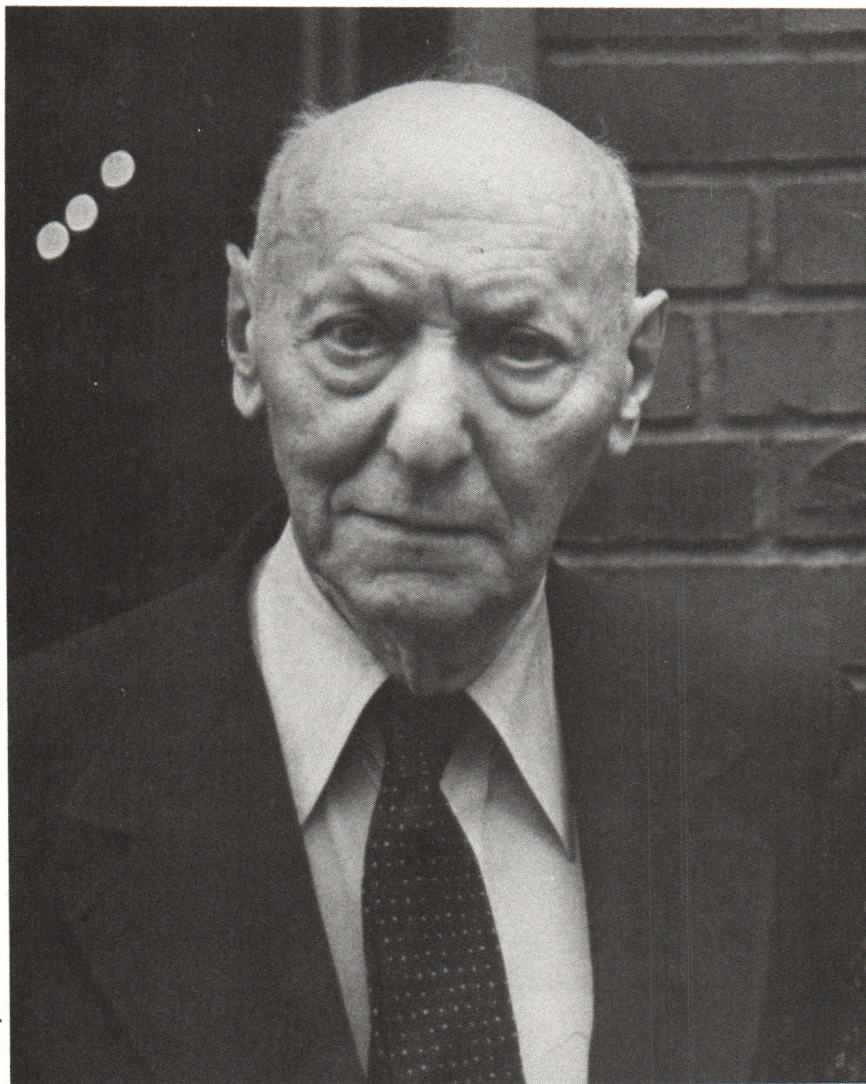


The master storyteller, Nobel Laureate, and philosopher in his own right, talks about his past, present and future, Yiddish, marriage, women, and more, in an interview just before his 80th birthday.

## Isaac Bashevis Singer at 80

an interview by ISIDORE HAIBLUM



Photos by Tomar Levine

**Isidore Haiblum:** First of all, let me wish you a very happy birthday on behalf of myself and Pioneer Women/Na'amat . . .

**Isaac Bashevis Singer:** It won't be until July 14th. But people have been celebrating my birthday already three-quarters of a year before, to make it snappy. I will wait until the 14th.

**IH:** In your memoirs, you often depict yourself as confused, bashful and timid. But photographs of you taken in the thirties and forties show a man full of self-confidence and shrewdness.

**IBS:** Well, I will tell you, I was never shrewd. God is my witness. Too much confidence in myself, I didn't have either. But I had confidence, so to say, in the higher powers. I felt that they wouldn't let me down completely. This I always believed.

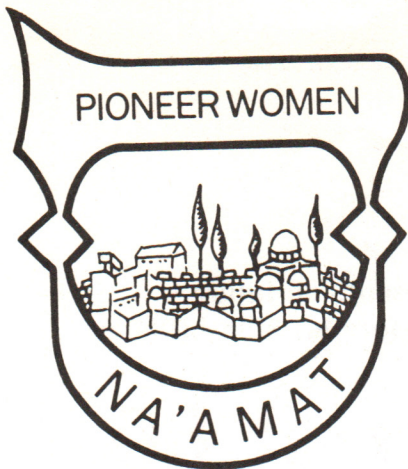
**IH:** Why?

**IBS:** I don't know. There's no reason for faith. There are many reasons for thinking one thing or another, but when it comes to faith, we don't know. We just have what they call in Hebrew, *bitachon* (security). I believe that what is destined, somehow will take place.

**IH:** Well, did this belief in the higher powers help you go your own way as a writer, despite the considerable opposition that you encountered in your early years?

**IBS:** I would say yes. I just felt that some power which takes care of every human being, maybe even every creature, every animal, has decided that I





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should do this kind of work and it will help me. Of course, it has nothing to do with logic, nothing to do with shrewdness, it's just a kind of *bitachon* which my parents had. My father always said, "If I'm not destined to be thrown out on the street, I will pay the rent, one way or the other." This kind of belief I have inherited.

**IH:** You are going to publish your memoirs called *Love and Exile* in the fall.

**IBS:** Let me tell you, they are not real memoirs. I would say 95 percent of them *are* memoirs, but there is an element of fiction there. The reason for it is that some of the people whom I describe are alive. I would say fiction is a small part of it. But still I cannot call it memoirs. I call it fiction based on memoirs.

**IH:** The period just after the First World War is one that you continually return to in your writings. What is the attraction this time has for you?

**IBS:** I was still a boy during the First World War. And you know, many writers feel that the first years of their creativity, or of their lives generally are important. You remember things more sharply — they make a greater impression on you. Of course, in my case, I go back to my childhood more than many other writers, because I happen to have lived longer and had more time to write. Also I had to publish. I was always connected with the *Forward* and I had to publish weekly pieces. So when I didn't have a topic for a novel, I went back to my memoirs, to my memories, deciding that they were just as good as a novel.

**IH:** How did the hopes and dreams that you had for yourself as a young man in Warsaw, when you first started to write, turn out? Did you achieve what you set out to do?

**IBS:** I would say no human being is completely satisfied with what he has achieved. The reason for it is that every one of us could have achieved more than he or she did, if we would have applied our energy and our will. So my feeling is, I haven't done enough. But just the same, I've made an effort. As far as material achievement, I achieved more than I ever expected. I never expected to get much recognition or to be known in the world.

**IH:** Were there any real changes that you have undergone that surprise you now, besides your tremendous recognition and achievement as a writer?



On the Upper West Side of New York City: Isaac Bashevis Singer, author Isidore Haiblum and Devorah Menashe, Mr. Singer's secretary/translator.

**IBS:** No, there is no reason for being surprised. Of course, every day changes occur — there are changes all the time — small changes which become, when you sum them up, big changes. But basically, I have been doing the same thing for the last 50 years or so — writing, looking for a topic, going back to my memoirs. I wouldn't say that I have changed completely — the very opposite — I'm doing more or less the same thing, only with different matter, with different means.

**IH:** But still with great pleasure.

**IBS:** Yes. I still feel though that it's not so much the pleasure that keeps me writing, but that writing is the only thing I can do. So since it's the only thing, there's no way of ignoring it.

**IH:** As a young man, up until you left for America, you used to spend a good deal of time in the Warsaw Yiddish Writers Club.

**IBS:** I used to come there a lot, yes. It was both a club and a restaurant and a place to read newspapers and a place to meet people. We don't have anything like that in this country at all.

**IH:** And you miss it.

**IBS:** I missed it for years. Yes, I miss it even now in a way because I would

have liked to meet people of my own kind. But many of them have died already. When I came to this country, it was full of Yiddish writers and poets. They were all much older than I and they are not alive anymore. What is left is a very small remnant.

**IH:** You often write about bachelors who have many affairs. What are your thoughts on marriage?

**IBS:** I will tell you. You cannot really write any novel about people who are married and live peacefully one with the other. It is not a topic for literature because if everything is all right, why write about it? So when I write about love, the protagonist is either a bachelor or a divorced man or a widower. He cannot be a happily married man, because then there would be no story.

**IH:** Do you have any words to say about marriage in general? You have been married for 44 years. What are the advantages? Did having a wife help you in your work?

**IBS:** Yes, it helped me in a way. It's not so important having a wife, but having a home, an address, that's important. A person who moves every four weeks from one furnished room to the other, as I did before I married, could not have really stayed with his work. Many negative things could have



happened which would have kept me away from my writing. At least two years before I got married, I felt that it was time for me to have a home — not just to go from one furnished room to the other. It is true that after having a home, I still behaved for years, and I still do, like a man who lives in furnished rooms. I mean I try to steal some of my bachelorhood pleasures. But still, home is important. I would say it is important for everybody, writer or shoemaker.

**IH:** Your wife comes from a German-Jewish background and you are a Polish Jew. She doesn't speak Yiddish. How did this affect you initially?

**IBS:** In a way, it was not good for me. It would have been better if she could speak Yiddish. On the other hand, she did not interfere with me. For years we lived together and I told her that I was a writer. She only had to believe me — nothing had been translated. So to say, she gave me credit. And this is the way we lived and I grew accustomed to it. She minds her business and I mind mine. She does not tell me how to write and she does not quarrel with my critics. She is, in a way, both familiar and a stranger and it fits my kind of mood.

**IH:** Many of your friends, including the Yiddish writer Sokolovitch, went to Israel early in the game. Were they satisfied with what they found?

**IBS:** They were disappointed. When they came to Israel in those years, the majority of the people, even the leaders, were all against Yiddish. They called it all kinds of names: the language of the galut, jargon. They couldn't really scold it enough. And of course, there were not many Yiddish readers in Israel; there were some but not enough. These people, like all refugees, were disappointed. I don't think Sokolovitch was happy. I believe he died in this country, not in Israel.

**IH:** Do you feel that the Jewish culture will thrive in Israel more than it will in the Diaspora?

**IBS:** Yiddish or Jewish?

**IH:** Jewish.

**IBS:** If it will not prosper in Israel, it will prosper nowhere. After all, they teach Hebrew, the Bible, the Talmud, in the universities. My worry is about Yiddish. But the relationship to Yiddish has changed in a positive way. In Israel, they don't feel anymore that Yiddish is in competition with Hebrew. They don't think that we are going suddenly to break in and take over. Because of this, the opposition towards

Judith A. Sokoloff,  
editor of *Pioneer  
Woman*, presents  
Isaac Singer with a  
rare 1928 edition of a  
Yiddish dictionary  
for his 80th birthday.  
He will share the gift  
with his translator.



Yiddish is less and there is more leniency. But I would say that they are not too lenient. All kinds of foreign newspapers get subsidies, but the Yiddish newspaper never gets any subsidy from the government, because they say it's neither Jewish nor foreign. In other words, we are stepchildren there. But listen, you get accustomed to the situation. Since the Jew has been a stepchild for 2,000 years all over the world, why not be a stepchild in your own country, too?

**IH:** In 1943, in the Yiddish journal, the *Zukunft*, you wrote an essay about Yiddish literature in Poland in which you spoke of the tremendous idiomatic wealth that the Yiddish language had as well as some of its liabilities.

**IBS:** It is immensely rich in idioms which describe human character. It is immensely poor in precise scientific language.

**IH:** Most of the I.B. Singer translations around the world — and you've been translated into over 60 languages — come from the English versions of your work, not the Yiddish originals. Is there any possibility that the Yiddish texts which appeared only in the *Forward* or *Di Goldene Keyt* will be published in book form?

**IBS:** I don't foresee that this will happen in my lifetime. But it may certainly happen later. The texts have been changed; in the process of translation I did all kinds of things. When you translate, you see your work again and if you can improve things or change

things, you do. So there will be a lot of differences. Everything which I have written is larger in Yiddish. Take *The Family Moskat*, there are many chapters which have never been translated. The same thing is true about *The Manor* and *The Estate*. Students will be able to get Ph.D.s. or other titles just for discovering these changes and elaborating on them.

**IH:** Your use of the Yiddish language is masterful, simply incredible. But works like *The Estate* and *The Manor* are not available in Yiddish at all. They have never been published in a Yiddish book.

**IBS:** Someone from Israel brought me the whole Yiddish texts of *The Manor* and *The Estate*. They wanted to publish it in Yiddish. The only thing is that since I made so many changes in English, they wanted me to adjust the Yiddish text to the English. This is such a labor; it would take so much time that I keep on postponing it. I really hope that someone else will do it one day.

**IH:** Well, it would be a wonderful thing to see your collected works in Yiddish. I know that if we had Tolstoy only in English, and not in Russian, it would be a great loss. And I feel the same about your work, that it should be available in the language in which you wrote it.

**IBS:** Even more true. Because Tolstoy did not do so much cutting. The only thing I would say is: I don't think that I spoiled my texts in the process of cut-

*Continued on page 26*





Charters were presented to new clubs, Ma'ayan Hapoalot and South Jersey, by the Philadelphia Council at a reception held for new members, sponsors and life members at the National American Jewish History Museum in Philadelphia. Following the reception, the members were given a guided tour of the museum and the adjacent Sephardic synagogue. From left: Betty Lawler, Council president Betty Shuman, Tamar Friedman, Barbara Geshel-Green, Ma'ayan Club president Dina Mallach, Leah Edelstein, Jaci Leff-Tusman, Paula Rose, Council Membership chairwoman Belle Ginn and field worker Joan Schwartz.



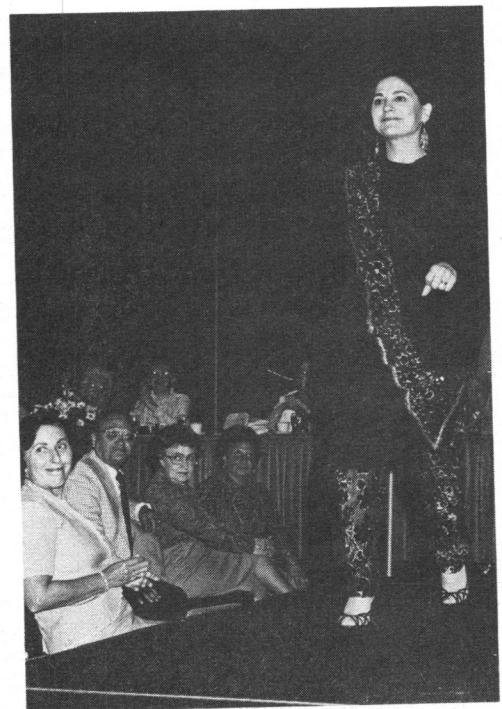
Palm Beach Council holds its festive 5th annual donor luncheon. From left: national Koach Campaign chairwoman Annette Navis, Southeast Area coordinator Bebee Pullman and Council financial secretary Jean Weitz.



Partaking in Suburban Chicago Council's outstanding donor dinner are, from left: Goldie Sosoff, Midwest Area director; Rosalie Grad, national board member; Miriam Sherman, Midwest Area coordinator; Marcia Pevsner, Council president; Rita Sherman and Judith Novick, both national board members.



Members of the Young Women's Network of the Western Area discuss Israeli issues at a meeting with Danny Goldberg, American Zionist Federation *schliach* (emissary from Israel). From left: Debbie Kane, Carol Jacobs, Danny Goldberg, Debbie Klein, Gail Krentzman and Ellen Ginsburg, YWN advisor.



Members and guests at St. Louis Council's annual donor and officers installation luncheon were treated to an exciting show of Israeli fashions, designed by the talented teenage girls at Pioneer Women/Na'amat Timon vocational high schools. Shown on the runway is Marci Cornfeld.



ting. I actually improved them. *The Manor* and *The Estate* would have had another 200 pages if they would have been translated completely from the Yiddish. The books would have been too large. In *The Family Moskat*, there are chapters which really don't belong to *The Family Moskat*. There are a number of chapters where I described the Polish mountains and the hero's visit there, which really could have been cut without any damage to the novel — actually, the novel would have been improved. So if *The Family Moskat* is going to be retranslated, there will be some positive sides to it and also some negative.

**IH:** What are you working on now?

**IBS:** I am writing something which I call *Dar Veyg Aheyem* (The Way Home), where I describe a man who went through the Holocaust somewhere in a dark room in Warsaw. Later he comes to New York. I myself don't know the novel's worth. I keep on writing it. I have written a number of things in my life which I'm not sure should be translated.

**IH:** Do you still attach great importance to being a storyteller, or do you feel now that you want to leave a message for the world?

**IBS:** I have no message at all. Of course, there are little messages hidden here and there in my books. I keep on saying that the modern Jew, the man who does not believe in the higher powers, who is only a completely worldly person, is more lost than our parents and grandparents were. I am just expressing a conviction in many variations. But if I have a message — in my heart I do have messages — I may still bring them out in the future if God gives me strength to do it.

**IH:** I hope that you will. Tell me, since this interview is for a "women's" magazine, do you feel that women have changed any over the years since you were a young man?

**IBS:** Yes, very much. When I was a boy, the average Jewish girl believed in one God and one husband. And today, the modern Jewish woman is as modern and as worldly — and sometimes even more so — than her gentile counterparts. So I would say that we have, in a way, lost what we call the *taharas hamishpacha* (family purity). It's not there anymore. The so-called Jewish princess not only wants better clothes

and trips and places to study, but she's also interested in love making — she doesn't believe really in the institution of marriage. The change is tremendous — and far from being positive, good for us. You can state the fact, but you cannot really change it. You cannot take a girl who has studied at Harvard and has read all the modern novels and seen all the shows and make her like my mother. You cannot do it.

**IH:** From your perspective of having attained 80 years and a lot of wisdom, what advice would you give to the younger generations?

**IBS:** I agree about the 80 years, but not about a lot of wisdom. Although I myself don't keep it 100 percent, there is a biblical message in the Book of Exodus and this is the Ten Commandments. If you keep 10 commandments — even if you keep nine — you're on the right track. If you keep nine and a half commandments, it's even better.

**IH:** What about eight?

**IBS:** If you keep eight — then you're already in trouble. If you kill and steal, the others are not worth a penny, so better keep at least nine.

**IH:** You have often said that you live *as if* you would live forever, *as if* you would work forever, *as if* you could achieve *anything*. Is that still your philosophy?

**IBS:** No, it's not mine. The philosophy of *as if* was originated by a German philosopher by the name of Hans Vaihinger. I don't say that only *I* live *as if*, I say that *you* also live *as if*. We all live *as if* we are going to be here forever, knowing at the same time that they very opposite is true.

**IH:** But you do believe in the higher powers?

**IBS:** I believe that there are many secrets of which we have no inkling, truths which we would consider completely impossible. Just as we did not know 300 years ago about DNA and microbes and many other things. There are many secrets behind our backs, almost even before our eyes, which we don't see. I'm sure that the man who will live here 1,000 years from now will consider us so ignorant that he will not believe that we could have lived in such ignorance for so long a time. ■

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*Isidore Haiblum is a novelist living in New York City. He has had ten books published over the last decade, and he has written numerous articles about Yiddish, humor and popular culture for a variety of magazines.*

high level of activity in her position as a women's studies professor, commented: "In just this one day, we got a year's worth of ideas and information."

Stimulating lectures on Labor Zionism were delivered by Eliezer Rafaeli, executive vice president of National Committee for Labor Israel, and Tsvi Bisk, research assistant at Beit Berl Institute, Kfar Saba, Israel.

Mr. Rafaeli outlined the system of political parties in Israel and the Likud-Labor differences. Regarding criticism from the Diaspora, he said: "Israel is not the state of the Israelis, but the state of the Jews, so you have the right, if not the obligation, to participate in the quality of that state."

Following an eloquent presentation on the history of Labor Zionism, Tsvi Bisk — who was born in the United States and made aliyah to Israel — also spoke about the role of Diaspora Jews: "You may be first-rate critics, and we in Israel may be third-rate playwrights, but who will history remember more, the critics or the playwrights?"

A scholarly presentation on World Jewry was given by Dr. Jacob Katzman, producer-director of Jewish People's University of the Air. With Dr. Robert O. Freedman, professor of Political Science and dean of the Graduate School of Baltimore Hebrew College, participants explored the critical topic of U.S.S.R.-U.S. rivalry for influence in the Middle East.

## The Pioneer Women Difference

In the Pioneer Women tradition, the seminar was the beginning of many new relationships with *haverot* from across the country. At a late evening *kumsitz*, amid *freilich* singing and dancing, a participant from the Midwest remarked: "We are not just seminarists anymore, we are friends."

Older participants praised the involvement of the young women and younger participants commented on the bond they felt with the women in their 50s and 60s.

Masha Lubelsky captured the feelings of everyone in the group: "When a *havera* from Brazil meets a *havera* from Australia or anywhere else in the world, there's no question — it is still the same *haverschaft*." ■

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*Maury Grabel Wohl is the Public Relations director of Pioneer Women/Na'amat.*