

...turns into speech" is an apt summary of Professor Felstiner's admirable book.

For Caroline, who found unsuspected reserves of inner strength, the strain was back- and nerve-breaking.

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Once upon a time

BY CHAIM BERMANT



A BRIDGE OF LONGING:
THE LOST ART OF YIDDISH
STORYTELLING
David G. Roskies
Harvard, £23.50



Sholom Aleichem — canon fodder

This is a good book, so don't be put off by the title: it has nothing remotely to do with either longing or bridges. Its sub-title is also misleading, for there are any number of Yiddish storytellers about, some of whom are masters of their art but, unfortunately, they don't tell their stories in Yiddish.

Hebrew persisted as a literary medium long after it ceased to function as a spoken one, and writers only turned to Yiddish when they resolved to break through to a wider market. When Yiddish fell out of use, they turned to other languages, usually English.

Most of the Yiddish writers were active in the *Haskalah*, the movement for Jewish enlightenment, though, as Roskies points out, they used the didacticism and style of Jewish tradition, if only to dismiss it.

"Theirs," he writes "was a treasonous art if ever there was one." He also believes it was futile, if only because the dream of enlightenment gave way to "a new movement for Jewish self-determination." But there would have been no such movement without the *Haskalah*, one's misgivings about which are not because it failed, but because it possibly succeeded too well.

Even if I found myself arguing with Roskies at every turn, I read his book with admiration and pleasure. It reminds me in some ways of F R Leavis's "The Great Tradition," in which Jane Austen, George Eliot,

Joseph Conrad and Henry James were singled out as the greatest of novelists, and D. H. Lawrence as their one true successor.

Roskies's canon includes Rav Nahman of Bratslav, Isaac Meir Dick (or Dik, as he calls him), Isaac Peretz, Sholom Aleichem, *Der Nister*, Itzik Manger, and Isaac Bashevis Singer as their true successor.

Not everyone agreed with Leavis's canon and I have reservations about Roskies's. He mentions Mendel Mokher Seforim in passing, but doesn't accord him sufficient weight. He accords excessive weight to Dick (1814-93), whose lapse into obscurity is probably deserved.

Nahman of Bratslav is enjoying a revival, but for no good reason I can see. Unless he was privy to divine secrets hidden from lesser men, many of his stories are pointless.

But Roskies has made me see Pinkhes Kahanovitch (1884-1990), who wrote under the mysterious name of *Der Nister* (The Hidden One), with new eyes. His analysis of Sholem Aleichem, Peretz and Manger is masterly, his study of Singer, inspired. His book is about the most stimulating guide to the Yiddish classics available in the English language.

...crocus through snow"

...book on the subject I
...turns him on.
...nic is followed by a
...air. Returning to
...elves to make a con-
...ting wife. Her failure
...brilliant. He remarks
...corners of her life are
...ess and contentment.
...a limitation in some
...it is a clever accom-

...n the fourth floor of
...idemic building, the
...a hitherto childless
...feels "deep inside
...of life, like a crocus
...snow."

...somewhere in the
...l that ends well.

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