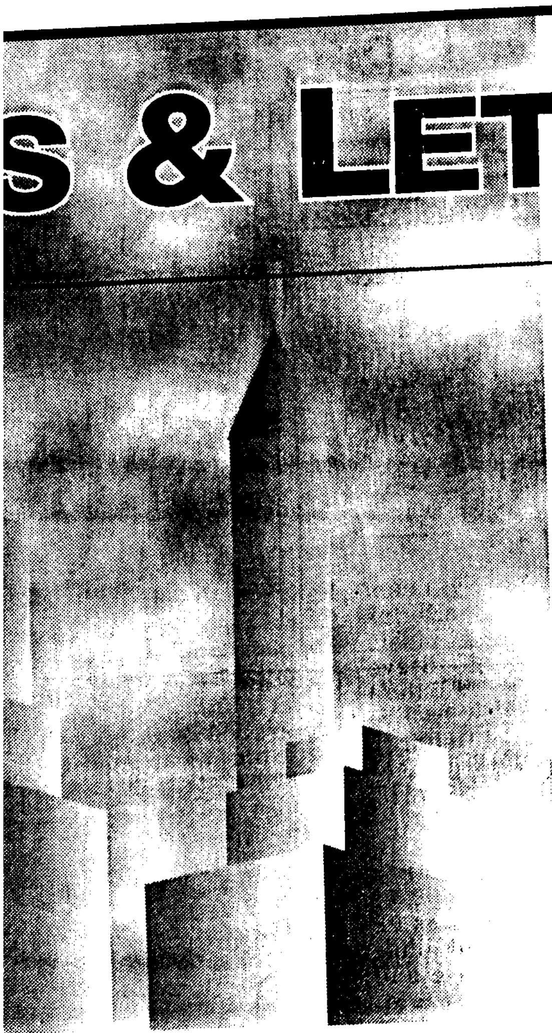
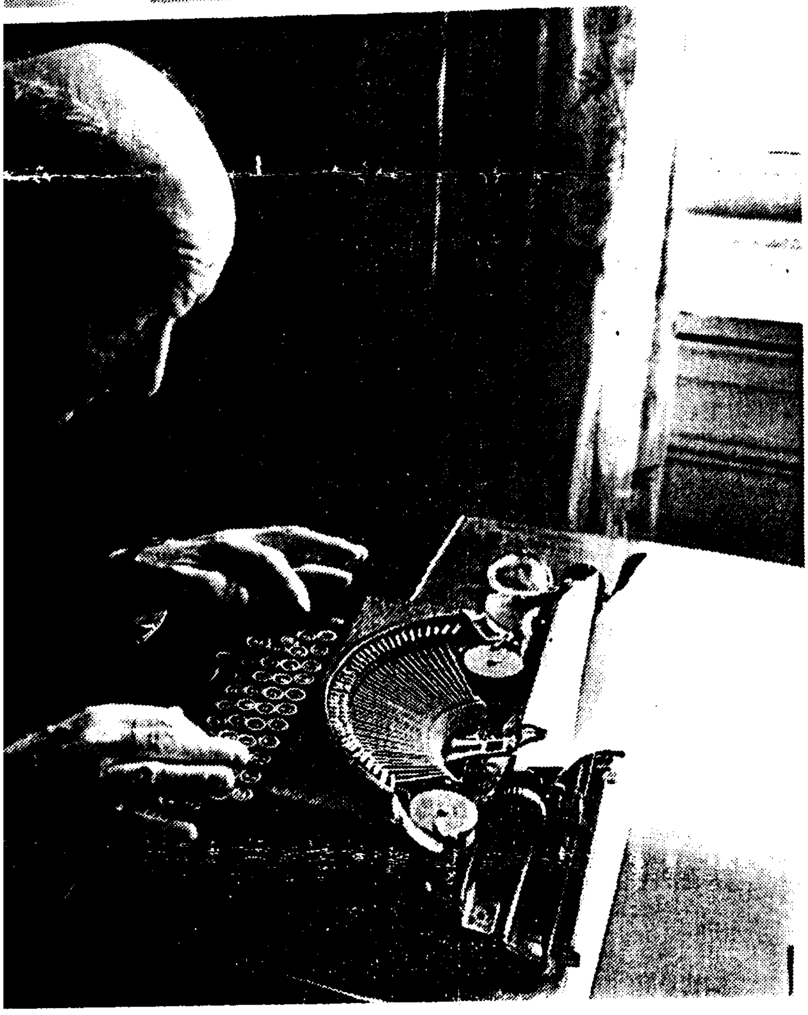


The Novel Singer Vowed He Would Never Write

Demystifying an Upper West Side Ghost Story



Shadows on the Hudson: A Novel
By Isaac Bashevis Singer
Translated by Joseph Sherman
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 548 pages, $28.

By **DAVID ROSKIES**

Emerging from a prolonged writer's block in March 1943, Isaac Bashevis Singer publicly disavowed America as a possible setting for a Yiddish novel. Yiddish in America was dead, he proclaimed, in a controversial manifesto published in a small journal. The language was limited to an ever-dwindling sector, and so the only creative recourse was to return to a reimagined, Yiddish-speaking past. This he did in a series of family sagas, notably, "The Family Moskat" (1950), in dozens of carefully wrought short stories and in loosely connected memoirs about his father's rabbinical court (1956). Then, like one of his own characters, Bashevis broke his vow in full view of the public and with no holds barred. In January 1957, he began to serialize in the Jewish Daily Forward a huge novel set in Manhattan and Miami Beach that would take a year's worth of installments to complete. What made him do it? Was it so radical a departure from the works that came before? Had Bashevis finally "arrived" as an American-Jewish novelist? And why, if later novels about American-Jewish life, like "Enemies: A Love Story" (1966), were to be edited and translated in his lifetime, did this pioneering venture languish in newsprint for so long?

A writer of lesser ambitions might have been satisfied to describe those pockets of the American urban landscape where Yiddish was still spoken in the novel's time frame, the immediate aftermath of World War II. Instead, Singer assiduously avoids Williamsburg and the Bronx, and the closest he comes to the Lower East Side is an artist's atelier in Greenwich Village. The main characters all live in the distinctly non-Yiddish-speaking parts of town: Boris Makaver, a patriarchal figure, lives in what is easily identified as the Apthorp Apartments on 79th Street. Anna, his wayward daughter, starts the novel living with her second husband across town on Lexington. Her lover, the novel's most tormented figure, moves in and out of his apartment on Central Park West, and there is a memorable seance that takes place somewhere between Columbus and Central Park West. Who knew better than Singer himself, who had married the German-speaking Alma Wasserman in 1940 and was now moving in her social circle, how little Yiddish was being spoken there? Indeed, the cast of characters is a polyglot group, and the novel abounds in stage directions that inform us what language is "really" being spoken: Polish, German, English, plus, here and there, several dialects of Yiddish. Hertz Dovid Grein, the aforementioned most tormented figure, is an intellectual. "He made his notes sometimes in Polish, sometimes in English, sometimes in biblical Hebrew, and sometimes in all three languages at once." What draws the core group of characters together are their shared memories of prewar Warsaw. New York City thus becomes a kind of palimpsest, which just barely conceals the sights, smells and sensibilities of another time and place. Like Singer himself, Makaver has chosen to live in the Apthorp-style apartments precisely because they remind him of the Warsaw courtyards of his youth.

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Singer's ambition, alas, far outstripped his abilities at that point in time. Linguistic diversity notwithstanding, the American setting is hardly more than a tease

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Makaver lives on the 14th floor of an apartment complex — a literal enactment of the Yiddish expression "di hoykhe fenster," a phrase that means "high windows" and more generally denotes the high society to which the wealthy Makaver belongs. Singer is still operating at an almost allegorical level in his dealings with America, rather than applying the realism that served him so well in "The Family Moskat" seven years before. Central Park is sometimes white and sometimes green, but no one stops there long enough to finish a single conversation. More to the point, there is nothing comparable in this novel to the riveting opening scene of "The Family Moskat," where Singer conjures up the sights and sounds of up- and downtown Warsaw, circa 1908. Instead, "Shadows on the Hudson" opens with a dinner party in Makaver's apartment, which introduces us, in the most confusing way possible, to almost all the key players and hands us the romantic triangle on a silver platter. Perhaps this is the point: that these Jews are in New York but not of New York. If so, Singer could surely have made the point in fewer pages.

The novel, in other words, is long on shadows, short on the Hudson. Its shadows are twofold: More than half the novel takes place after dark, at parties, seances and midnight romps; and the past casts a very long shadow over the present. As for the late-night sexual imbroglios, it is astonishing to see how early in his career Singer already began to plagiarize himself. Starting with "The Family Moskat," the main protagonist is always the one who is involved simultaneously with three members of the opposite sex, is running around in a state of confusion, but somehow finds the time for lengthy philosophical digressions. Only Hertz Grein qualifies to play this role. Anna, although she is involved with three men at once, is given short shrift as a thinker ("Freud was right — everything was sex, Anna philosophized"); and besides, she is suddenly, inexplicably, transformed into a successful, all-American businesswoman.

The psychic shadows are another matter. Each generation is here portrayed wrestling with its respective ghosts. Where there is sex, death cannot be far behind. Some, like Luria, die a kind of *Liebestod*, from a death kiss delivered to him at a seance. Others, like Dr. Margolin, rush back into the arms of the German woman who had betrayed him for a Nazi. The younger generation likewise succumbs to the plague of the past. Whereas the older folk still know enough of God's commandments to obey them in the breach, most of their children go whoring after His Old Country rival — Joseph Stalin. Makaver's American-born nephew actually emigrates to Soviet Russia in 1947 and is never heard from again. Lest the reader has forgotten who they are, Singer brings together all of the novel's misguided party members at one big fund-raising bash at the very end. Written at the height of the Cold War, "Shadows on the Hudson" equates the evils perpetrated by Hitler with the evils perpetrated by Stalin, the lasting damage caused by one with the lasting damage caused by the other. Politically, Singer's bracing message was way ahead of its time.

Against this bleak backdrop, in which all redemptive schemes lead to ever-greater suffering, Singer offers his chief protagonist but one way out. "He had only two roads he could follow," says the narrator of Hertz Grein, "one into the abyss of murder, fornication, falsehood; the other to abstinence and self-restraint. For him there was no middle way." Just yesterday, Asa Heshel Bannet, the hero of "The Family Moskat," had stood before the same impasse. History, coming in the form of the German blitzkrieg, had rendered his indecision moot. Grein has more on the ball than Asa Heshel, and New York, in the last analysis, is not Warsaw. Grein returns to a loveless but morally compelling marriage.

There is one more dimension to this novel, however, that has yet to play itself out. If there is any ray of light, if the novel's rambling philosophical debates serve any purpose other than to showcase Singer's own self-indulgence, it is to take seriously a life guided by the uncompromising strictures of Jewish law. All along, Singer has been raising the stakes in the contest between id and superego. All along, the major characters have been quoting scripture and remembering snippets of the Talmud, or have been moved to pull a medieval ethical tract off of a bookshelf. At the height of his confusion, Grein revisits a shul, for the first time in decades. The surprise ending delivers the punch: Grein signs off the novel with a letter from the ultra-Orthodox Me'ah Shearim quarter of Jerusalem. So much for the Hudson.

It is the artificial ending that gives the game away. It has been used once before, to much greater effect, in Singer's dark, antiredemptive parable, "Satan in Goray" (1933). He reuses it now because for Singer, *plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose*. From start to finish, Singer evinced a radical skepticism about the possibilities of human freedom and human choice. He wrote his very bleakest works in the late '20s and early '30s, when naturalism was all the rage in Poland and places West. He did so again, when the Stalinist purges and the Nazi genocide confirmed his philosophical pessimism from below. If anything, the forced ending of Singer's first "American" novel represents a faint glimmer of hope, which has nothing to do with America, the Holocaust, or the whole complicated web of triangular relationships. It has to do with Singer's father, the stubborn but ineffectual champion of rabbinic law, formerly of 10/12 Krochmalna Street in Warsaw. "Shadows on the Hudson" is the imaginative sequel to "In My Father's Court." It is the fantasy of a prodigal son who renounces civilization and its discontents and returns to a world bound by God's commandments.

But there is more, because Singer's ambition goes beyond tackling the big theme of radical freedom versus radical self-renunciation. "Shadows on the Hudson" is also Singer's belated rebuttal to "East River" (1946), by his main Yiddish rival, Sholem Asch. Where Asch celebrated the promise of America by staking out a poor, working-class and multiethnic neighborhood, Singer exposes the failed promise of America by staking out the "high windows" of the Upper West Side. Where Asch used the theme of intermarriage to signal the ethical superiority of the New World over the Old, Singer uses the theme of intermarriage to argue the total bankruptcy of Jewish secularism. The one exceptional gentile, Grein's daughter-in-law, Patricia, proves the rule. She is the only second-generation character to forsake communism for Judaism. "East River" ended with the Wolf family moving from their tenement on East 48th Street to a roomier, healthier apartment along the Hudson. "Shadows on the Hudson" ends with the hero giving up his Upper West Side apartment for a hole-in-the-wall in Jerusalem.

Singer remained constant, but how the times have changed! Today, Sholem Asch's ecumenical, pro-American parable reads like a quaint relic, while Singer's anti-communist, anti-humanist "Notes from the Upperground" have already been acclaimed a masterpiece of post-Holocaust fiction. Paradoxically, the superb translation by Joseph Sherman adds a precision and quality of toughness to the prose that makes Singer's "lost" novel seem much better than it really is. "Shadows on the Hudson" is a very ambitious and very flawed novel. Since, however, it released the author from his vow never to write about Jewish life in America, it served a Nobel purpose.