

The story in Yiddish

Title: **A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling**
 Author: **David G Roskies**
 Publisher: **Harvard University Press**
 415pp
 Reviewer: **Sylvia Irlich**

THE ANOMALY is that they no longer spoke the same language as the "folk"; yet so rich was their fictional milieu that it was mistaken for ethnography. "Creative betrayal" is the term used by David Roskies to describe how generations of Jewish writers used selective retrieval to preserve their sense of the past. Living in fragmented societies, they attempted to overcome loss of religious and secular faith by utilising folk tradition; often re-imagining themselves as characters in their own stories.

Rabbi (Reb) Nahman ben Simhah of Bratzlav (1772-1810) turned to storytelling because he could not reveal his messianic program outright, his cause being universal redemption. Reinventing Hebrew and Yiddish stories, he told fairy tales, while ending down commentaries to throw light on hidden meanings. In this way he was able to mingle scholarship, folklore and a mythic past with the historic present to present a new form of Jewish self-expression.

The first professional Yiddish writer was Isaac Meir Dik (1814-1893), a born-again rabbi, whose story sermons were published in the spoken language. He became a best-seller. Adapting Hebrew classics, he wrote moralistic tracts, prayers, domestic romances, adventure stories, biographies and satires; and using the history of past events and personalities, underscored the progress Jews had made since emancipation.

Isaac L Peretz was a 39-year-old disbarred lawyer from Warsaw, hired by a wealthy aristocrat to travel the back roads of Poland to gather information which hopefully would decrease antisemitism. Soon he began writing stories and using the fictional guise of a gentrified traveller, wrote of strained relations between husbands and wives, Jews and Christians and between the old culture and the new, his radical works being distributed in Russia as well as New York.

A believer in secular humanism, alienation, flight and arrest were all part of his turbulent life. During imprisonment, he translated the bible into modern idiom; then re-wrote medieval romances and hasidic legends, before turning to naturalistic plays about the life of fallen women, sin, redemption and faith.

Solomon Rabinovitch was a stockbroker in Kiev who became Sholem Aleichem (Mr Do You Do) between the hours of five and three am. In *Tevye the Dairyman*,

After taking his plays to America, return to Russia was shortlived, the family fleeing the 1908 Kiev pogroms. Then the author contracted TB, necessitating years spent in European spas. Open-ended travellers' tales ensued, with a storyteller moving through 3rd-class compartments of Russian trains. Able to turn chaos into comedy, many stories were based on newspaper clippings sent by appreciative readers. In 1915, the family returned to America, where Sholem Aleichem rewrote his autobiography.

Der Nister (Mr Hidden) born Pinkhes Kahanovitch, reached the pinnacle of his career in 1922, when his fantastical tales were published simultaneously in Moscow, Berlin and New York. Taking the style of a Jewish mystic, he explored the meaning of creation, revelation and redemption, mixing poetry, prose, cosmology and folklore. In symbolic tales, a hero had to prove himself, face inner blackness, overcome his own shortcomings and emerge both healed and a healer. But these tales were never channelled back to the folk and were attacked for decadence in the late 1920s. Der Nister's fantasies were banished to specialised libraries.

Itzik Manger was born Isidore Hefler in Czernowitz, 1901, but loving the German language, he invented a new persona taking Berlin as his birthplace. When war broke out, Isidore and his family fled to Jassy in Rumania, where he became a Yiddish troubadour, his fascination with the ballad being sparked by reading modern European poetry.

In the 1930s, Manger retrieved the Bible for secular Jewish ends, publishing bible

courtiers were laughable, self-important figures, their offspring shtetl-dwellers. Yet he became the most sought-after Yiddish songwriter in Poland and was the first to write for the Yiddish screen. His Megille-lieder also became popular in Israel, breaking the Israeli taboo against Yiddish.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, fabulist, was born Yitzchok Singer in Leoncin, Poland, in 1904. Perceiving the history of the Jewish people to be an ongoing revolution against the powers of darkness, Singer drew on his religious heritage for his stories, using demonic monologues to debate issues of redemption and destruction. He responded to the Holocaust through past martyrdoms.

Disparaging of American Yiddish culture, Singer believed Yiddish to be unsuited for the modern world because the language no longer revealed folk belief or religious passion, nor did it contain speech patterns unique to women, demons or underworld types. He therefore returned to Old World settings for his characters where Yiddish was an integral part of their lives, and to create a more perfect past for himself, intermingling memoir with fiction to rewrite his biography.

In *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, David Roskies presents an intriguing analysis of Yiddish writing and authors (including also Yosel Birstein, Shai Agnon, Israel Trunk and Avraham Sutzkever) who were able to "revive something new from the old". While "betrayal" may be an unfortunate analogy to use, even when preceded by the word "creative", Roskies, like the authors themselves, beckons readers into an enchanting world.



Yiddish writers in Poland: (from left) Sholem Asch, Isaac Leib Peret, Peretz's son Lucjan and (reclining) David Nomberg.

From the book *Image Before My Eyes*. Shocken Books, New York.

King David's city

IT HAS been the subject of attention ever since the ancients compiled the texts from the 20th to 10th century BCE. The wealth of data relating to the city that time pays to the city's enduring or writers, historians indeed, Jerusalem is not only a city in Israel written information from the mute archeo-

Hebraic year marking the 3000th anniversary of David's conquest of Jerusalem. The market with new releases books on Jerusalem, some of these have been reviewed or noted in other titles are Colin Rubenstein's *Jerusalem* (Penguin 1995) originally published in 1980, and, among the latest, the impressive volume *Jerusalem* by Harvard University Press this year.

Nitza Rosovsky, it is the city that King David made his capital. It has a

Title: **City of the Great King: Jerusalem from David to the present**
 Editor: **Nitza Rosovsky**
 Publisher: **Harvard University Press, 562pp, US\$39.95**
 Reviewer: **Nadine Davidoff**

rich and fascinating text, providing extensive coverage of the many facets that constitute Jerusalem's textual as well as actual identity.

Rosovsky's introduction outlines the book's intention and points of reference. In intimately connecting Jerusalem with King David, Rosovsky sharpens the book's specific appeal and pertinence in this celebratory year. The connection is deepened by her attempts to draw similarities between the city and its king; indicating, for example, that "just as the life of David was filled with light and shadows, so is the history of Jerusalem."

Jerusalem's antiquity as a historical entity is not, however, the

sole subject of this book. Covering a vast time-frame through 500 pages of text, there must be more. There is; and to deal with Jerusalem's diverse aspects, Rosovsky has divided the book into three categories, each comprising a number of chapters.

The first section, "The Heavenly City", focusses on Jerusalem as a religious and spiritual centre. Each of its seven chapters deals with a different topic ranging from Jerusalem in Jewish spirituality, through Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to the City's spiritual meaning for Islam. The overarching idea unifying these chapters is that side by side with Jerusalem being a temporal, earthly reality, it exists as a religious idea, as a symbol and an embodiment of holiness. Indeed, for many people today, Jerusalem as Heavenly City still holds far greater potency than Jerusalem as a 20th century reality.

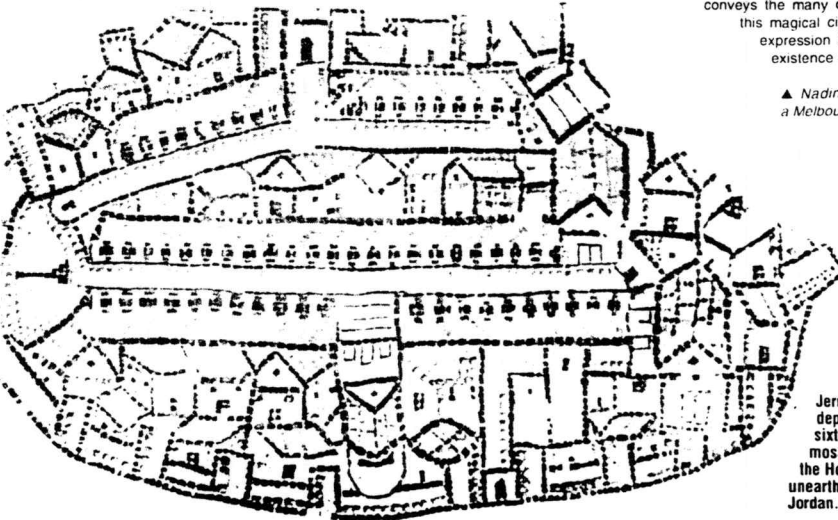
By way of contrast, the next section portrays Jerusalem as a modern political entity in the Middle East. Made up of two chap-

ters, the first deals with the complex relationship between Jerusalem and the Zionist movement, and the second focuses on Palestinian images of Jerusalem, and while the emphasis is on Jerusalem as a modern, secular city, each contributor indicates how the fierce nationalism of both political Zionists and non-religious Palestinians is infused with a deep sense of Jerusalem's status as a holy city.

The third, and to my mind, most fascinating section, discusses the Jerusalem as represented in literature (Islamic, western and Israeli), in art and through its topography, geography and architecture. It is in these essays that one comes to appreciate the extent to which this highly mythologised city has bewitched and intrigued generations of artists and visitors of many faiths. As a palimpsest on which each artist inscribes his perception, the representations of Jerusalem are as rich and multi-layered as the city's own vast history.

Rosovsky has here assembled a wealth of rich and challenging essays. Her selection conveys the many dimensions of this magical city, both in its expression in dream and existence as a reality.

▲ Nadine Davidoff is a Melbourne reviewer.



Jerusalem, as depicted on a sixth century mosaic map of the Holy Land unearthed in Jordan.

mystical beast

The Coat of the Unicorn, volumes 1 and 2.

Nathan Merel
 Nathan Merel, 5 Mendele Street, Jerusalem.
 Victor Kleerekoper.

tells us that the unicorn, a mythical animal found only when Moses led the children of Israel were in the desert. Its coat is a brilliant crimson and was created to protect the Tabernacle's also used to wrap the scrolls as the Jews wander the wilderness.

The unicorn was used in the Holy vessels the sayings. These hidden legends are the basis of the two volumes.

The Coat of the Unicorn combines passages

and Talmud as well as Midrash and commentaries — which give new and interesting insights. Starting with the first chapter *Twilight* the work looks at every possible nuance in every word or expression used.

To cite but one example: "The Land of Israel is compared to a deer. The Gemara gives two reasons — To tell you that the skin of a deer, once it has been removed, cannot be made to contain again its flesh; so cannot the Land of Israel contain its produce which grows in such abundance that the store houses cannot provide sufficient accommodation. The second reason is to tell you that as the deer is the swiftest amongst the animals, so is the Land of Israel the swiftest of all lands in the ripening of its fruit."

This is a scholarly work by a learned layman with a love of both the written and oral Torah.

▲ Victor Kleerekoper is a senior writer at the Australian Jewish News. The books are available at

Arabs and Jews

Title: **Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948**

Author: **Zachary Lockman**

Publisher: **University of California Press, 440pp, US\$ 25.00**

Reviewer: **Serge Liberman**

MOST DISCUSSIONS of pre-State Jewish and Arab populations tend to portray two separate coherent self-contained communities independent and essentially uninfluenced by the other or caught up in periodic violent conflict.

Zachary Lockman, Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History at New York University, argues that Jewish and Arab workers did interact through their trade unions, labour movements, or worker-oriented political parties in Palestine just before and during British colonial rule.

Arguing against any interpreta-

nationalistic contexts of the late 19th and 20th centuries, he maintains that the Zionist movement and the Yishuv were shaped in crucial ways by their interactions with the Arab society they encountered "on the ground."

Lockman reconstructs the long and complex history of labour Zionism's efforts to organise Arab workers under its tutelage, and the contradictions it often entailed, and, at the same time, documents its own relations with Arab workers and their own labor movements. He demonstrates that Arab workers in Palestine were not merely passive objects of propaganda or of the organising efforts by either Zionists or upper-class Arab nationalists, but historical actors in their own right.

Most histories of early 20th-century Palestine concentrate on the already much-explored political, diplomatic or military dimensions of Zionism and its development towards Jewish statehood. But Lockman aims more at a socioeconomic and cultural his-

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

Dunera Legacy

A NUMBER of book-studies have in recent years emerged about the Dunera which, in 1940, shipped alleged "enemy aliens" from England to Australia, where they were interned in camps in Hay and Tatura. Many of these were Jews who had fled Germany before World War II. In their number were Boaz Bischofswerder, who had been an Obercantor in Berlin's Brunnenstrasse Synagogue, and his son, known today as a Melbourne-based composer, choral conductor, music critic and lecturer, Felix Werder.

While in Hay and Tatura both father and son continued to compose music. Two separate scores of the father's music have now been published.

Fantasia Judaica, a work (without words) for four tenor voices, was actually composed on the Dunera, but arranged for piano and violin in Hay with a flute part being added by Felix Werder in 1995. The other work is titled *Mi Adir and Sheva Br'achot*, with the accompaniment of the Piano or Organ, composed in the camps, and containing also music to *El Male Rachamin, Lechu Neran'nah, Ynu Eynaim, Y'hi Shalom B'chelech and El Kolohem*.

Both scores are published by, and available from, the Archive of Australian Judaica, Fisher Library, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, for \$25 each plus \$5 postage.

Ottoman rabbi

IT IS a pity that such a particularly engaging book carries the so-narrowly specific title, *Haim Nahum: A Sephardi Chief Rabbi in Politics, 1892-1923* (University of Alabama Press, Box 870380, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 35487-0380, 204pp., US\$39.95).

For, interesting as was the life of this French-trained Chief Rabbi of the Ottoman Empire around the turn of the century, the book also tells of the many momentous changes coursing through this Levantine belt which is so uniformly a blind spot in standard Jewish histories.

This period, after all, was the swan-song of an empire that, having stood strong for some 400 years, was now both disintegrating within and falling to Western-style modernity without. In addition, for Jews, this was the period of the Alliance Francaise (established in 1860 to institutionalise international Jewish solidarity) and its ambitious strong-minded prole in Haim Nahum, and the emergence of that touchy ideology, Zionism.

It was given to Rabbi Nahum to weave a tortuous path between all these elements while also attending to his rabbinical and pastoral duties.