

clothes, singing Hassidic songs and relating Hassidic lore, were led by Shlomo Nizan who is of a renowned Hassidic family. This troupe appeared throughout the country and even sabras and oriental Jews were enthralled as the young troubadours sang songs of such universal appeal.

This play was put on entirely by sabras—not only the cast, but the writer Dan Almagor and the director Joseph Yisraeli, as well as the artist Dani Karavan who designed the sets.

Among the other successes of Bimot was "The Sephardic Cherry Orchard," by Yitzak Navon, Deputy Knesset Speaker, who is a scion of an old Sephardic family. He tried to revive the songs and music of his youth in a story of a Jerusalem family of Sephardic Jews, carrying on their daily lives.

It is never easy for a small private company to launch a play by a local playwright. When "Napoleon Dead Or Alive" was put on, in spite of favorable press reviews, tickets did not sell and Bimot had

to take the play off. The writer, Nissim Alloni, who has made a name for himself with his sensitive and brilliant satires ("The Emperor's Clothes," Habimah, and "The Revolution and the Chicken," Cameri) has evaded the standard formula for local plays—the conflict on the kibbutz and nostalgic themes of early days. But his brilliant satires are considered too obscure. While the large subsidized theatres are able to keep plays running until the theatre-going public catches up with them, this is very difficult for the small companies without financial backing.

"The Gypsies of Jaffa," written and directed by Nissim Alloni is having a successful run at the Habimah now. Written in his usual fanciful way, it tells of Jaffa, "city of sanctuary, city of hamseens, oranges and gypsies," city "founded before the flood."

There is little substance to the plot which revolves round the homecoming of a murderer intent on another murder. However, the droll



*"Sephardic Orchard," Theatre Bimot.*



*"Aunt Liza" with Hannah Rovina in wheelchair, Habimah.*

characters and the colorful gypsy nightclub add to the entertainment. Then there are the imaginative costumes and the setting by Yosl Bergner which bring to mind the paintings of this gifted Israeli artist.

Three generations of Habimah actors appear in this performance. They include Hannah Rovina as the gypsy—leading lady of the Israeli theatre—she is warmly applauded as she makes one of her rare appearances on the stage. Another old-timer is Raphael Klatchkin who steals the show as he plays a role which is close to his own life, an aging actor who has to play the buffoon.

Very often the most unpretentious places attract theatre-goers and even influence theatrical trends. Such is Tzavta, a basement in the heart of Tel Aviv that was originally opened as a cultural meeting place for Mappam. Here, in a cramped little hall, sitting on hard wooden chairs, an audience of young students and workers makes its way to see the latest avant-garde plays. It is here, at the Saturday midnight performances, that they have their first taste of Genet and Mrozek with the stress not so much on action as on human problems. Many young acting groups

*(Continued on Page 26)*





# BOOK reviews

## LONG AGO ON THE EAST SIDE

**A BINTEL BRIEF: SIXTY YEARS OF LETTERS FROM THE LOWER EAST SIDE TO THE JEWISH DAILY FORWARD**, edited by Isaac Metzker. New York, Doubleday & Co., 214 pp., \$6.95.

The Jewish Daily Forward occupied a very special place in the hearts of its readers. More than a mere newspaper, it was a guide to the new world for the immigrant generation that made it the largest Yiddish daily in the world—a quarter of a million circulation at its peak. It was big brother, best friend and learned scholar all rolled into one. Its pages covered a dazzling array of topics: social, religious, economic, political, and never failed to take sides. Even its novelists, poets and short-story writers—and they were among the finest on the Yiddish scene—rarely forgot to come across with a moral or two in the course of their creations. The reader expected it, desired it, and in fact would have felt cheated without it.

*A Bintel Brief* was the Forward's ultimate educational weapon. For over sixty years the column replied to reader's queries, gave advice on a bewildering variety of topics. It was a place where readers "bared the wounds of the soul" and no problem was too big or too little to merit attention. The feature, Abe Cahan's brain child, was immediately successful and has retained its popularity among Forward readers to this very day. Cahan, the paper's editor-in-chief, co-founder and guiding spirit, ran the *Bintel Brief* column himself in its heyday and most of the shrewd advice offered was his. Isaac Metzker, a Forward editor, has now compiled the best of these columns, Diana Shalet Levy has expertly translated them into

English, retaining a great deal of the warmth and flavor of the originals, Harry Golden has written an introduction and notes, and Doubleday has put the entire package between hard covers and titled it, appropriately, *A Bintel Brief*. The portrait it gives us of the Lower East Side of long ago is an incomparable one.

The letters range from the most humorously trivial (these a decided minority) to the most devastatingly serious (the vast majority). An example of the former is the young man circa 1909 who has "every reason to be happy" but is not because "nature has seen fit" to give him red hair. "I endure many insults in the shop and on the street," he writes. "When I hear someone say to me, 'Hello, Red,' I am hurt and offended." He has even consulted doctors, he adds. The Forward wisely replies, "Those who laugh at this young man have no brains," and points out that being greeted with a "Hello, Red," is no worse than a "Hello, Blondie," concluding, "The letter writer has absolutely no reason to be upset about this."

An example of the latter, more abundant type of communication is far less amusing, but equally indicative of its time: A man writes (it is 1908) that he is literally starving to death. "Lately I've spent five cents a day on food, and the last two days I don't have even that. I have no strength to go on." He has been jobless for six months now. "One goes about with strong hands, one wants to sell them for a bit of bread, and no one wants to buy." The man says, "Death is better than such a life." The Forward offers concrete advice, sending him to the "Crisis Conference" on Eldridge Street where he will, at least, not be allowed to starve and implores its readers to help the man find work.

Suffering is the rule here; many of the problems are staggering in their immensity, the pleas truly heart-rending. Some sample opening lines suggest the volume's tone:

"I am an unhappy lonely orphan, fifteen years of age, and I appeal to you in my helplessness."

"I am one of those unfortunate girls thrown by fate into a dark and dismal shop, and I need your counsel."

"I have been in the country only two months, and I find myself in

such terrible circumstances that I need your advice."

"I hope that you will give me the opportunity to tell the world about my sufferings."

"Have pity on me and my two small children and print my letter in the Forward."

Here you will find abandoned wives and infants by the score; impossibly wretched working conditions coupled with starvation wages; seemingly insoluble problems of aging, family, love. This is not the advice column we have become accustomed to in the American press. The bond between reader and author is far more intense, intimate. "I beg you to help me with advice in my desperate situation," writes one woman. "I beg you to tell me how to act," writes another. A third concludes: "With tear-filled eyes I beg you, dear Editor, to advise me what to do. Maybe through you I will find solace for my broken heart." Time and again the reader asserts his willingness to place himself entirely in the hands of the columnist, to undeviatingly adhere to the advice. The confidence seems to have been complete. It was as if a remarkable healer were being consulted, one whose word was law, whose prognosis was totally beyond question.

These Forward readers were people who ardently cared about right and wrong. For them morality was a very serious matter indeed. A person's honor was more than a mere abstract notion; it was the very stuff of life. So we read: "At home we were starving. . . . On a certain morning, when my mother went out into the hall she found food that good people had left at our door. That same day, from misery and shame, she killed herself by slitting her throat with a knife." A man shoots himself for having introduced a boarder into the house who subsequently ran off with his brother's wife. A free-thinker is tormented by his desire to attend *shul* on the high holydays.

They fiercely believed in principle, in justice, hungered for it and sought to uphold it, in a world that teemed with wrongdoing and injustice. The letters are touched by this kind of nobility.

Their language also is something to marvel at. It is super-charged, emotional in the extreme. Abounding with: *I beg yours, have pities*



and tell the world of my sufferings, it can, at times, seem outrageously melodramatic. But these were, first of all, people addressing their brothers and sisters. Secondly, their dilemmas were often truly dreadful. And, finally, Yiddish lends itself to this sort of hyperbole; its emotive boiling point, in comparison with the far more sedate English, is much lower. In Yiddish it is quite natural to discuss, say, a pot of milk bubbling over on the stove in terms that would be appropriate for an earthquake or perhaps the sinking of New York into the Atlantic. There is a charm to it.

One last virtue deserves mention. Out of the misery and poverty of those early decades the trade union movement took shape. Its growth is obliquely charted in these pages, its achievements made evident. Abe Cahan and the *Forward* were among the early leaders of the struggle and the material well-being of the modern generation rests in part on their labors. It is cause for much pride. With success, however, came alienation and partial amnesia; some people forgot the old, terrible times, and a few were even wont to complain that no times were as bad as the present. Loss of memory is apt to result in such foolishness. *A Bintel Brief*, then, can serve as a corrective, can help set the record straight. For through these letters we hear the voices of our ancestors—and their era—loud and clear. It is something of a revelation.

ISIDORE HAIBLUM

## THE HOLOCAUST ONCE MORE

AN ESTATE OF MEMORY, by Ilona Karmel. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 444 pp., \$6.95.

*An Estate of Memory* is unique. It has dared to make a brilliant, metaphysical story out of material grounded in horrendous history, the concentration camp of Hitlerite Europe. By giving its characters this unusual pedestal from which to present their lives, a revolving pedestal where past has the dramatic importance of present and future, it continuously flashes a triple vision of the characters. The spectacle of their past lives tightly held in the present, in the hope that their particular futures will be realized, spins about the reader like theatre-in-the-round. It is rare reading.

Four Polish women are the main characters. They are from different strata of Polish society — Tola Ohrenstein, sole survivor of a wealthy mercantile family from Cracow; Barbara Grünbaum, Aryan-looking and the former lady of a manor; Alinka, a lonely child both fierce and fragile; and Aurelia Katz. These women's lives become intertwined in a German concentration camp in Poland when they meet as the war begins to go against Germany. They set up an intimacy with one another that is best characterized as an active interest in one another's survival. It is a quality that at once gives new depth to affection and a framework to their lives.

The catalyst is a child about to be born to Aurelia. From this impossible situation—pregnant women were put to death in concentration camps—arises an interest in life as it would go on under normal circumstances. The women plot to keep Aurelia fed while they exist on starvation rations; they try to keep her from the hardest labor; always they must conceal her condition under penalty of losing their own lives. The newborn baby is smuggled out of camp into war-torn Europe. Will the child make it? Love and desire must live and this answer threads the novel like a skein of sunlight.

Ilona Karmel's characters constantly grow in depth during their intolerable imprisonment. If they are to survive, the author argues, they must be stronger and more positive people than their prisoners. Evil works upon those willing to be corrupted. Conscience and a sense of mission survive to grow again in people who have nurtured it. This seems to be the moral of the tale.

The square of the Appellplatz is the center of life for these concentration camp inmates. Time starts with the painting of Xs on their clothes; it ends as they are marched out to dig their own graves. During their internment, they are separated from a world of events against which they would measure their character changes. Nevertheless, they do change. Barbara, once cared for like a child by her husband Stefan, becomes a woman of energy and self-sacrifice. Tola, once indulged and pampered, learns to push and



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sell for her friends' sake and takes on the abhorrent job of work supervisor in the camp. Each woman there has her contemplative life surrounded by her own particular web of circumstances. Alinka, only fifteen years old and a former maid, makes human contact with a German guard and then finds that a deep pride prompts her to spurn his gifts and kindly gestures. Unrecorded and forgotten, it is, nevertheless, engraved upon the racial record. These women had retained the concept of goodness, for they have remained kind to one another under threat of great evil and suffering.

*An Estate of Memory* avoids sentimentality by a twist of style sustained throughout the narrative. It marches the women through the calendar of horrific events without involving the reader in the emotional agony each step of the way.

(Continued on Page 22)



# ON SCREEN

## KING LEAR

A Martin Ransohoff Production  
Produced by Lord Michael Birkett  
Directed by Peter Brook  
Released by Filmways, Inc., in  
association with The Royal  
Shakespeare Company  
Distributed in the United States  
by Clem Perry through  
Altura Films International, Inc.  
Running Time: 135 minutes  
Principal players: Paul Scofield,  
Irene Worth, Cyril Cusack,  
Patrick Magee, Susan Engel,  
Annelise Gabold.

by JANET WANDEL

The timelessness of Shakespeare's works is proven anew. On the heels of the White House Conference on Aging and Ralph Nader's exposé of the American neglect of the aged, comes The Royal Shakespeare Company's "King Lear." The foibles of old age and its ruthless intolerance by the young is an old/new tale.

This "King Lear" is every inch what a film adaptation of Shakespeare should be. Full of tension unrelieved until the finale, powerful, moving, brutal, it is in no way gentle or beautiful. Paul Scofield's King Lear is waspish, rash, finding calm and self-knowledge only too late.

Lear's three daughters are perfectly cast: cold, grasping Goneril (Irene Worth); softer but equally corrupt Regan (Susan Engel); proud and truthful Cordelia (Annelise Gabold). Goneril and Regan go from treachery to treachery, lying to their father to satisfy their greed for his kingdom, cuckolding their husbands (in spirit if not in reality), suspicious of each other, vying for the affection of Gloucester's bastard son, Edmund, until

Goneril causes Regan's death and takes her own life.

The subplot about the Duke of Gloucester, hideously blinded, and his two sons, Edgar (somehow flatly interpreted, considering he is a character so vilely wronged) and the bastard Edmund, is played out in bas-relief (but with a horror all its own), paralleling what is happening to Lear—utter betrayal of the old by the young. And poor Kent, played movingly by Tom Fleming, banished and reviled, who serves his King selflessly and lovingly to the end, more of a child to Lear than wretched Goneril and Regan.

Peter Brook's direction is exquisitely precise. He keeps all his actors in control, resulting in performances without a trace of theatricality.

The landscape, actually Denmark, is bleak, cold, unforgiving; the costumes, heavy furs and leathers, all convey the look of dark-age Britain.

Filmed appropriately in black and white, the photography by Henning Kristiansen is peerless. His camera work is so vivid that it almost becomes one of the characters of the piece. Lear's mad scene in the storm—thunder, flashes of lightning, howling wind, drowning rain—allows the audience to see the raving King, his Fool, the imploring Kent from two viewpoints at once: how the characters see the moment themselves and how the audience views the players. Lear's madness is thus both experienced and viewed.

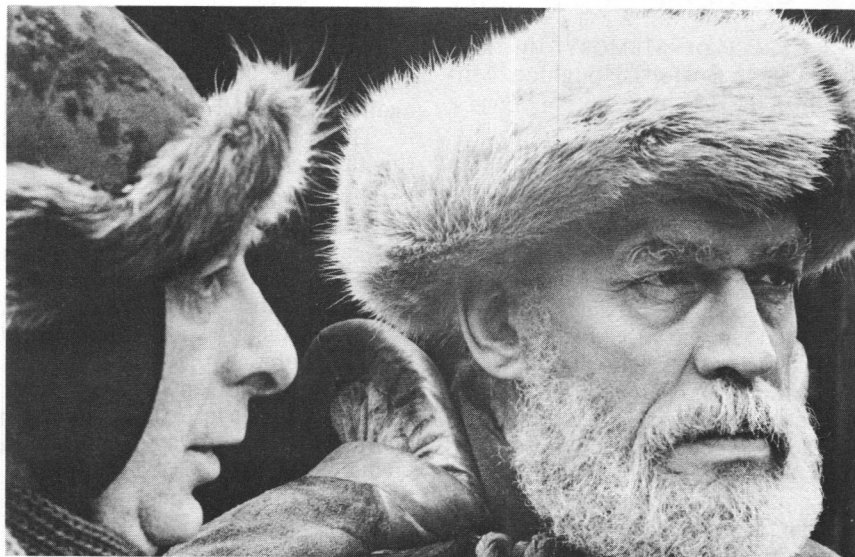
Again the magic of the photography: the rapid succession of seeing

Goneril knocking down Regan in a jealous rage, killing her, then, snake-like, weaving faster and faster in frenzy until she kills herself, banging her head against a rock. This is followed immediately by a flash of the captured Cordelia's death by hanging. Thus, Lear's three children die almost at the same moment—luckless Cordelia suffers the same fate as her sisters.

One last mention of the superb camera work—in the final scene of the film, Lear is grieving over the body of Cordelia and for his ruined life. He is slowly dying of heartbreak, slipping lower and lower on the movie screen until he falls from view and the audience is aware that the King is dead.

Make no mistake about it: this "King Lear" cannot be construed as a film about rebellious youth (Lear's daughters as well as Gloucester's sons) fighting the Establishment of the elderly King and his court. This is a film about man's helplessness in the face of fate, but more significantly, about avarice and lack of love in deadly combination with gross impatience to create—tragedy.

Finally, a comment aimed directly at the academicians who ask: "Yes, but how closely does this 'King Lear' follow Shakespeare's text?" It should be pointed out once and for all that a masterpiece of one genre requires no comparison with its source in another. The Royal Shakespeare Company's "King Lear" can stand alone as a completely and satisfying whole.



Paul Scofield as King Lear (right) with his Fool.