



The Jewish Search for a Usable Past

By David G. Roskies
Indiana, 217 pages, \$24.95.

By ILAN STAVANS

With primitive English skills, I arrived as a graduate student at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the mid-1980s. Although I had made up my mind to concentrate on the works of Maimonides, Hasdai Crescas and Spinoza, among the first classes I enrolled in was David Roskies's survey of Yiddish literature. I had gone to Yiddish-language schools in my native Mexico, where I had read in the original, among other books, Sholem Aleichem's "Tevye the Milkman" and Israel Joshua Singer's "The Family Carnovsky." Typically, the fragmentary impression left by my schooling didn't allow for a comprehensive view of Eastern European Jewry before 1945 — of the *shtetl*, the urban milieu. Just before I left Mexico I began to reread these and other classics. But it was Mr. Roskies's course that rewarded me with an exhaustive, unsentimental picture of the bygone era.

Around the time I met him, Mr. Roskies had published his first important book, "Against Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture." It clearly encapsulated his mission: to study the oral and written Yiddish literary traditions as manifestations of a collective psyche equipped with the necessary tools to react to an aggressive environment. Though his area of expertise was Yiddish, the volume was savvy and encyclopedic, revisiting the biblical and rabbinic periods and making insightful comments on modern Hebrew letters as well. Neither in class nor in his work did Mr. Roskies fit the pattern of other scholars in the field, who set out to prove that, as a group, Yiddish literati are second to none.

Mr. Roskies, as I remember him, used an intra-cultural approach. He was not out to explain why Abramovitsh, Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, Bergelson and Der Nister are on a par with Joyce, Proust and Faulkner. It was Jewish literature, standing tall, that needed to be scrutinized as a self-sufficient unit. Isaac Bashevis Singer had been awarded the Nobel Prize in 1982; it didn't seem logical to continue the search for legitimization. Mr. Roskies's strategy was closer to that of the folklorist: to scrutinize

the labyrinthine paths of Yiddish civilization.

In the belligerent field of Yiddish scholarship, teeming with petty rivalries, Mr. Roskies is set apart by his vast knowledge of cultural facts and artifacts. That singular intellect is evident, once again, in "The Jewish Search for a Usable Past," a disjointed collection of essays that, while not as memorable as his earlier books, is incisive and thought-provoking. It takes him on a transcontinental odyssey from Germany to Eastern Europe to Israel and the United States, from schools to parodic songs, from sites in Tel Aviv to graveyards in New York.

The book is made of nine independent essays, a handful of which were delivered as lectures at Indiana University in 1998. Their common theme is that Jewish memory — tombstones, the *shtetl* itself, books — remind one of how, among the Jews, loss is constantly retrieved and how redemption occurs in the most unexpected moments. My own favorite piece, and perhaps the most groundbreaking, is "A Revolution Set in Stone: The Art of Burial." It explores how, challenged by modernity, Jews, especially the members of Socialist unions such as The Workmen's Circle and the

Yungt-Bund, revamped their burial traditions. Mr. Roskies begins in Berlin with *Die Gesellschaft der Freunde*, the Society of Friends, which, in 1792, began to innovate: coffins instead of shrouds; epitaphs in German, not just in Hebrew; dates given according to the Gregorian, not the Jewish, calendar and so on. To highlight how deep the changes have gone, Mr. Roskies stud-

Roskies takes his readers on a thought-provoking odyssey.

ies other regions and visits the tombs of important literati and labor activists, mostly in the New York area: those of pioneers of Yiddish secular culture such as Sholem Aleichem and Abraham Reisen, and those of socialist and anarchist activists, including Jacob Goldstone and Aaron Shmuel Liberman. In "The New Science," the 18th-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico was the first to suggest that cemeteries are the true foundations of civilization: Nomadic life ends the moment the dead are buried at a particular site, and a sense of tellurian belonging results from the act. Vico's idea has singular echoes with the Jewish people, at once nomadic and sedentary in its more-than-2,000-year-old Diaspora. What makes Mr. Roskies's essay memorable is the invitation to revisit not ideas but stones and to discuss the fashion in which the living embrace and sanctify the dead. He opens enormous possibilities, in Yiddish studies and for other fields, with his systematic approach to crypts as texts:

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Please turn to Page 12

WORK and her religious life. Here's an easy compromise," she said. "My husband and I are renting a hotel room within walking distance of the theater."

iful Losers

icken by a tragedy that exceeds anything he ever dreaded. "Zwilling's Dream" is populated by the afflicted: failures, widowers, bereaved fathers and women who can't bear children, not to mention the living ghosts of the Holocaust, people who "had no good subsequent idea of what they lived for, actually. Other than to keep living ungrudgingly in order not to die." Unlike Horkow, the novel doesn't waste time wondering why these calamities happen. Instead it examines how their survivors stumble forward and what attitude they take toward their suffering. "How did you do this?" an appalled Horkow asks Zwilling and is told: "Badly. I did it badly. You will also." This clarity of judgment makes "Zwilling's Dream" wise and even redemptive book, led with sentences as startlingly elegant as Zen koans. Too bad its central character is such a pill. Joel Zwilling's abdication from literature and — really, from all deep emotional connection — is presented as a kind of probity (among other things, it seems to be atoning for the fact that his last published story anticipated his wife's death and perhaps, symbolically, brought it on). But it looks more like passive cruelty. Everyone around Zwilling is constantly trying to elicit something from him and getting nothing back. His only jacks up his credit with them. As Mr. Feld conceives it, Zwilling's Bartleby act makes him not just admirable, but preposterously desirable. When the otherwise astute Ashjian offers herself to him, the scene might be a textbook example of male climactic fantasy: "I need to love you. You may also need me to, or maybe not. Remember, I am disgustingly capable. The barest minimums leave me content. Men don't know how little women will settle for." She reaches orgasm the instant Zwilling lays a finger on her.

Of course, one doesn't take a personal dislike to a novel's character unless one somehow believes in him, grants him the premise of life. Likable or not, the characters in "Zwilling's Dream" breathe; they surprise each other and themselves. They surprise the reader. Mr. Feld is too canny and truthful a writer to turn his losers into winners. Instead, he has written a novel in which losing is a given: something that everybody does, sooner or later, with varying degrees of ineptitude and grace.

As for a florist fallen.

"As for a florist fallen," Mr. Berlyne repeated. "That's actually rather good, don't you think?"

I did and proceeded to thank him by reciting a verse from my own New York childhood that went:

The boy stood on the railroad tracks
Saying all his *brokhes*;
Along came a choo-choo train
And knocked him on his *tokhes*.

"I wonder if it was the same boy," Mr. Berlyne mused. "You don't mind if I use that some day in a column, do you?"

"I'd be honored," I said.

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Meeting Modernity's Challenge

Continued from Page 11

Throughout "The Jewish Search for a Usable Past," Mr. Roskies styles himself an anthropologist dressed as cultural critic, and the suit fits him handsomely. In "A City, a School, and a Utopian Experiment," Mr. Roskies pays tribute to the idealistic mode of *Yiddishkeit* in his native Montreal in the early part of the 20th century. (Yiddish scholars and literati paraded through Mr. Roskies's home when he was young, a factor that became decisive for him and his older sister, Ruth Wisse, who teaches Yiddish at Harvard University.) And in an essay at the heart of the volume, he scrutinizes the role rabbis have played in Jewish history, both secular and sacred: from repositories of truth to dogmatic pedagogues to problem solvers and Christian-like idols.

Unfortunately, Mr. Roskies's style veers toward the obscure and abstruse; it isn't argumentative as much as it is accumulative — in Henry James's dichotomy, he prefers to tell than to show, and to tell in endless detail. Something similar, as I recall, occurred in the classroom: He started with an ambitious thesis articulated in sharp contrast with its antithesis, but the number of examples he offered was so overwhelming that in the end no synthesis emerged; instead, what students got was a mosaic of wonderful if disparate examples. Nevertheless, I would invariably leave his classroom enthralled; I'm convinced his pedagogic approach was a calculated strategy.

This approach, along with Mr. Roskies's position as a scholar rather than a public intellectual, has made his work the property of a small audience. But patience makes the reward plentiful, for hidden behind the rich assortment of anecdotes and instances is a forceful viewpoint, and that viewpoint comes together like a jigsaw puzzle — in retrospect, and



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only when the parts become a whole. He knows quite well that the past is infinitely malleable, and his books scrutinize the way in which that malleability becomes a commodity. While his subject is Eastern European Jewry in all its splendor and ugliness, his approach is invaluable for understanding Jews today in a rapidly moving world where identities are so easily refashioned and where tradition is under siege.

In spite of his Canadian background, Mr. Roskies strikes me as an all-American product, particularly a New York one. For where else if not in Manhattan, the land of Walt Whitman's "body electric," does identity reinvent itself so easily? It is thanks to Mr. Roskies that I began to approach the *shtetl* as a favorite fountain of kitsch. For that, for the meticulous way he has built a view of Jewish memory as a house of mirrors and for his take-no-prisoners embrace of Yiddish, I, his student, am deeply grateful.