CHAPTER 13

YIDDISH LITERATURE

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Last summer, as I drove my son to nursery school by bicycle, we came upon the familiar movie vans parked on both sides of Riverside Drive. At 116th Street, with its quaint carriage entrance at the corner—a favorite of all fashion photographers—we noticed two old Fords and a Pontiac, a green-and-yellow city bus and yellow checkered cab, all lined up in mint condition. Workers had just finished repainting the street lamps brown and had installed a hackstand and walk-in phone booth of the kind that Clark Kent used when he had nowhere else to change. On our way home that afternoon we learned that the crew was setting up to film I. B. Singer's *Enemies, A Love Story* (New American Library, 1989), which explained the flashback effect to forty years ago. When the movie was released I was astonished to discover other dissemblances: that the exterior shots of Central Park West in a driving blizzard were the very ones shot on Riverside Drive in the heat of the summer; that the Catskill vacation scenes were shot in the Laurentian Mountains outside of Montreal, my hometown, where, in turn, most of the "Lower East Side" was reconstituted.

All of this has made me think about why there is more of I. B. Singer's work available in translation than that of any other Yiddish writer, living or dead; about Singer's fortunate decision, made very late in life, to describe the American urban landscape; and about Singer as a possible guide to reading modern Yiddish literature as a whole. Singer himself is the master dissimulator, whose best work affects a storytelling style, exploits the rhythms and linguistic layers of Yiddish, and draws heavily from the work that came before him. So to the extent that Singer's work is neatly divided between fantasy and reality, and that his own life is not-so-neatly divided between the Old Country and the New, Singer can indeed serve as a guide to what in Yiddish literature is worthy of being read and reread.

For readers hungry to know about the real lives of Yiddish authors there is embarrassingly little to go by. Singer himself has written two memoirs: *In My Father's Court* (Fawcett, 1980) recalls the domestic dramas that Jews from all walks of life enacted before his father, an Orthodox rabbi, and *Love and Exile*, which brings together three autobiographical novellas (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986). Whereas the father is busy enforcing God's Torah, the son is off pursuing his carnal desires while dabbling in philosophy and kabbalah on the side. If this sounds familiar, it is because similar plots and love triangles reappear in Singer's fiction as well. And so it goes with the few available memoirs of Singer's illustrious precursors. Yiddish writers do not bare their souls.

The founding fathers of Yiddish literature were Mendele Mokher Seforim (Mendele the Bookpeddler), pen name of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1836–1917); Sholem Aleichem (literally "Peace be with you," the standard Yiddish "Hello"), pen name of Solomon Rabinovitsh (1859–1916), and Isaac Leib Peretz (1852–1915). Mendele's memoir *Of Bygone Days* focuses exclusively on the folkways of his native *shtetl* in White Russia where he lived until his father's death in 1850. In the book's delightful preface, "Mendele the Bookpeddler" pays a visit to "Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh," now living in Odessa, to convince the real author . . . to write his memoirs! Though "Abramovitsh" protests that Jewish life is like an anthill in which the individual has no role to play, "Mendele" and the other guests finally prevail. Dan Miron's pathbreaking *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Schocken Books, 1973) goes a long way toward explaining why this first generation of Yiddish moderns could not address their audience other than through masks—the folksier, the better.

Sholem Aleichem's *From the Fair*, translated by Curt Leviant (Penguin Books, 1986), likewise makes no pretense at truthfulness. Billed as a biographical

novel, it charts the rise and fall of a storyteller from his roots in a semilegendary *shtetl* to his "banishment from Eden" and the beginnings of his adult life as a government-appointed rabbi. Only Peretz (who dropped his many pseudonyms once he became an established writer) wrote a truly modern, introspective, and self-consciously *literary* memoir. It reveals his lifelong struggle between heart and mind, a split which philosophy, science, and even art could not resolve. (The memoir is included in Ruth R. Wisse's *A Peretz Reader,* discussed later in this essay.)

Perhaps the most revealing Yiddish literary autobiography is the most fanciful, Itzik Manger's *The Book of Paradise*, translated by Leonard Wolf (Hill & Wang, 1986), which recounts "The Wonderful Adventures of Shmuel-Aba Abervo"—before he was actually born! Paradise, it turns out, is a turn-of-the-century Galician *shtetl* where biblical heroes, hasidic rabbis, and lower-class Yiddish-speaking angels fall in love, write Purim plays, get drunk, and have to contend with Christians who steal their Messiah Ox. The hero, who alone retains total recall of life in Paradise, can regale the *shtetl* elders down on earth in much the same way as the baby Jesus had once inspired the Magi in Bethlehem.

Yiddish writers, in fact, became so much the property of the folk that their lives took on paradigmatic meaning. Mendele was hailed *der zeyde*, the Grandfather of Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem, Mr. How-Do-You-Do?, was a household name on both sides of the Atlantic. Peretz was the standard-bearer of Yiddish culture, the "Prince of the Ghetto," as Maurice Samuel once crowned him. (Howe and Greenberg provide minibiographies of the major figures in their *Treasury of Yiddish Stories* of which more, below.) These writers were thus free to reinvent their own lives just as they reinvented the collective life of all east European Jews as embodied by their mythic birthplace, the *shtetl.*

The *shtetl,* or Jewish market town of eastern Europe, is arguably the greatest single invention of Yiddish literature. What the Western is to American popular culture, the *shtetl* novella is to the Yiddish imagination. Its symbolic landscape is etched into the Yiddish psyche. Main Street is dominated by the marketplace and is occupied solely by Jews. Instead of the saloon, there is the *besmedresh* (the house of study); instead of the church, the *shul.* The *kohol-shtibl,* where the Jewish notables meet, replaces the sheriff's office. And of course there is the train depot, either nearby or somewhat removed, through which unwelcome news and travelers arrive in town.

With this symbolic map firmly in place, the variations on the theme of the small town in a dangerous world were almost inexhaustible. Ruth R. Wisse has

Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz. (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research)

Sholem Aleichem (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research)

anthologized some of the most celebrated examples in *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas* (Wayne State University Press, 1986). But except for Mendele's ethnographic memoir *Of Bygone Days*, mentioned earlier, the literary image of these *shtetlekh* was anything but rosy, as becomes clear in this anthology. The title piece, I. M. Weissenberg's *A Shtetl* (1906), opened in the house of study with a scene of class warfare. Weissenberg's animus was partly fueled by Sholem Asch's *The Shtetl*, in *Tales of My People*, facsimile of 1948 ed., translated by Meyer Levin (Salem, N.H.: Ayer Company Publishers, 1970), that appeared two years before. Whereas Asch had written the first of many ecumenical fantasies in which the prayers of Jewish and Christian believers ascended to the same God, Weissenberg

charted the rising tide of anti-Semitism and political reaction that culminated with the czarist forces carting the *shtetl* revolutionaries off to prison at novella's end. By 1909, the *shtetl* had become the scene of *ennui* and existential despair in David Bergelson's *At the Depot* (in the Wisse anthology)—a script worthy of Ingmar Bergman.

As World War I and the Bolshevik revolution added the physical destruction of the *shtetl* to its earlier economic and social decline, Yiddish (and Hebrew) writers ever more exploited the *shtetl* as a symbol for Jewish collective survival. Joachim Neugroschel's *The Shtetl: A Creative Anthology of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe* (Overlook Press, 1990) and my own *The Literature of Destruction* (Jewish Publication Society, 1989) provide a horrific contemporary panorama of the *shtetl* under siege. Against this background we can view I. B. Singer's masterpiece, *Satan in Goray*, translated by Jacob Sloan (Avon Books, 1978), which refracted the apocalyptic events in eastern Europe through the lens of Jewish heretical movements in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Poland.

Much of Yiddish literature is dedicated to burying the *shtetl*, not to praising it. This fact is sometimes obscured in translation when the word *shtetl* itself is rendered as "village," to suggest a bucolic Paradise Lost, just as the rough-and-tumble *besmedresh* is invariably translated as "synagogue," to underline the image of a Holy Community engaged in constant study and prayer. Zborowski and Herzog's *Life Is With People* (Schocken Books, 1962), which eliminated the goyim, history, and geography from its idealized portrait of a timeless, archetypical *shtetl*, did much to further this sentimental myth of origins. The Howe and Greenberg *Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, 2d rev. ed. (Viking Penguin, 1990), remains the standard introduction to modern Yiddish writing probably because of its focus on the *shtetl* and on issues of social concern. Yet even Howe and Greenberg were hard pressed to find many examples of a united community that withstood the sources of seduction from within and the forces of destruction from without.

The collapse of a religious civilization as embodied by *shtetl* culture is not a happy sight, however favorably predisposed the viewer might be toward a secular tomorrow. The happy endings assembled by Howe and Greenberg—in Peretz's "Devotion Without End" (1904), Singer's "The Little Shoemakers" (1945), and Itzik Manger's "The Adventures of Hershel Summerwind" (1947)—are few and far between and are all written against the backdrop of prior destruction. The counterexamples, notably those written by Lamed Shapiro, are among the most memorable in the anthology. Few Yiddish writers could chart the trajectory of modern violence as precisely as Shapiro in "White Chalah" (1919), just as few

could so subtly describe the aesthetic and erotic desires that could drive a young yeshiva student away from the *shtetl* altogether ("Eating Days," 1926–27).

The Janus-faced *shtetl*, half haven, half hell, is key to the two major trends in modern Yiddish literature. Yiddish literature was born out of rebellion: the rebellion of sons against their fathers; secular pursuits against religious discipline; the individual against the collective. It was born when young writers escaped the medieval *shtetl* for the big city and beyond; when they abandoned the traditional forms of Jewish self-expression—synagogue sermon and poetry, rabbinic commentary, the sacred tales and lives—for European forms and forums—the satiric newspaper sketch, the lyric and epic poem, the novel and short story, drama and melodrama, the literary essay. This rebellion produced many works that were Jewish in language or subject matter but otherwise indistinguishable from comparable works in Russian, Polish, German.

At the same time that modernism gripped the imagination of these writers, a second, almost contradictory, countermovement emerged: an attempt to reclaim "lost" Jewish forms in the name of cultural renewal. Suddenly, and almost concurrently, Peretz discovered the beauty of Yiddish love songs, medieval romances, and hasidic tales; Sholem Aleichem turned to writing folk monologues; S. Ansky began recording Yiddish folklore and custom. Thanks to these pioneering efforts, the Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library can today include a superb volume of *Yiddish Folktales*, edited by Beatrice Silverman Weinreich (Pantheon Books, 1990), and Ruth Rubin could write a popular history of the Yiddish folk song, *Voices of a People* (Jewish Publication Society, 1979).

The folklore revival bore immediate fruits in Jewish eastern Europe: Chagall reinvented Jewish folk art, Itzik Manger rehabilitated the *Purim-shpil* (the folk plays performed on the holiday of Purim), I. B. Singer wrote monologues for Jewish demons—not to speak of Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, the all-time favorite of the Jewish theater repertoire. What is most extraordinary, and perhaps unique to Yiddish literature, is that no writer abandoned one mode for the other. The modern and the pseudo-folk voices coexisted. Peretz continued to experiment with new literary forms even as he perfected his *Stories in the Folk Vein*, selections from which are included in the *I. L. Peretz Reader*, described below. Sholem Aleichem continued writing novels about middle class morals and mores even as he put the finishing touches on *Tevye the Dairyman* (see below). And I. B. Singer began his career as a realistic novelist even as he immortalized "Gimpel the Fool."

Thus to become a Yiddish writer meant catching up on several centuries' worth of secular cultural development. That is how Abramovitsh came to write

The Travels of Benjamin the Third (1878), a marvelous spoof on *Don Quixote* (in Neugroschel's *The Shtetl: A Creative Anthology*). When the young Solomon Rabinovitsh launched his literary career in the late 1880s under the pen name of Sholem Aleichem, he wanted nothing less than to write the great "Jewish Novel" à la Turgenev. The result was seen in two novels that dramatized the struggle of the artist in traditional society: *Stempenyu* (in Neugroschel's *The Shtetl*) and *The Nightingale Or, The Saga of Yosele Solovey the Cantor*, translated by Aliza Sherrin (G. P. Putnam, 1985). These fictional "folk artists" were Sholem Aleichem's shorthand for the struggle between Judaism and Hellenism, between class and national loyalty on the one hand and the call to artistic self-expression on the other.

But Sholem Aleichem's real genius was released only when he put the novel aside in favor of old-fashioned literary forms. *The Adventures of Menahem-Mendl*, translated by Tamara Kahana (Perigee, 1979), is a zany, fast-clipped, and tragicomical exchange of letters between that peripatetic *schlemiel* (a ne'er-do-well) and his emasculating wife, Sheyne-Sheyndl. "The Haunted Tailor," the famous tale about a she-goat that kept turning into a he-goat, imitates the style of an old storybook, Hebrew captions and all (translated by Leonard Wolf in Howe and Wisse, eds., *The Best of Sholom Aleichem* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1989). And the Tevye stories in *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*, translated by Hillel Halkin (Schocken Books, 1988) is a series of monologues narrated "live" to "Sholem Aleichem."

The discovery that one could be modern and traditional at the same time revolutionized the way that Yiddish was written thereafter. Tevye—engaged in a three-way dialogue with God, his horse, and himself—has profitably been compared to Job. Then, in *The Railroad Stories* (published in the same volume as *Tevye*), Sholem Aleichem took traditional storytelling on the road to confront the whole welter of modern Jewish problems, from apostasy and suicide to anti-Semitism and the white slave trade. The resulting tension between *what* is being told and the folksy manner *in which* it is being told; between narrators using a language of faith to chronicle the collapse of a religious civilization, made possible the later writing of Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Singer's demons are witty and learned, very much in the Yiddish tradition. Where Singer differs from the founding fathers of Yiddish literature is that in stories such as "The Mirror," in *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), and "The Last Demon," in *The Collected Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), he enlivens the ubiquitous forces of evil, while Men-

dele and Peretz cut the devil down to allegorical size. Mendele's *The Mare,* in Joachim Neugroschel's *Great Tales of Jewish Occult and Fantasy* (Wings Books/ Outlet Book Co., 1991), costars Ashmedai, king of the demons, who is merely a stand-in for the czar. Which is not to say that Mendele's allegory has lost its punch. The book, written 120 years ago, is as trenchant a critique of Jewish liberalism as anything that appears in the pages of *Commentary.* And Izzy the Madman, whom the mare inducts in the ways of the world, could profitably be played by Woody Allen.

Peretz's demons are wittier still, as part of his sustained attempt to modernize Yiddish folklore. Peretz began writing pseudo-folktales at the turn of the century in order to dramatize for secular readers the ways of achieving transcendence—through nature, music, love, and self-sacrifice. Peretz's Hasidim are of a piece with Martin Buber's.

Yet while Peretz the neoromantic sometimes borders on the sentimental, there is a dark side to his writing that emerges ever so clearly in Ruth R. Wisse's recent *I. L. Peretz Reader* (Schocken Books, 1990). Here is Peretz's harrowing panorama of *shtetl* decay, its innocent title—"Impressions of a Journey through the Tomaszow Province" (1891)—beguiling the reader into unrelieved squalor and suffering. Here is Peretz the parodist exposing the hallowed traditions of Jewish passivity to harsh cross-examination in "Bontshe Shvayg" (Bontshe the Silent). Here is Peretz exploring the pathology of the *shtetl* intellectual in "The Mad Talmudist"; the sexual warfare of the *shtetl* home in "Bryna's Mendl"; and the split of heart and mind in his own anguished memoirs.

And so a Yiddish writer like I. B. Singer who came of age after the Great War was heir to two traditions—one that tried to stay on the cutting edge of what was then considered modern and the other that channeled the modern back into the forms of the past. Indeed, this tension became still more pronounced in the new urban centers of Yiddish culture—in St. Petersburg, Kiev, Warsaw, Lodz, Berlin, New York.

S. Ansky's "The Dybbuk" makes the point in its original title: "Between Two Worlds" (and so do I in my forthcoming anthology, *The Dybbuk and Other Writings* by S. Ansky, translated by Golda Werman [Schocken Books, 1992].) One of Ansky's worlds centered in St. Petersburg and Paris, where Russian was the lingua franca and revolutionary politics made the world go round. The other centered in the endangered *shtetlekh* of the Ukraine and Galicia where no effort was spared to rescue the ethos, the heroes, and artifacts of the folk. Younger writers, meanwhile, intent on liberating Yiddish from the folk and from anything resembling a

"The Dance of Death": a still from the 1937 Yiddish film of S. Ansky's play, *The Dybbuk.* (From the Rutenberg & Everett Yiddish Film Library, a collection of the National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University)

traditional worldview, made Kiev their center of operations. Here David Bergelson's hypnotic prose style and existentialist outlook on life made him the major Yiddish novelist of the twentieth century. (The newly revised *Treasury of Yiddish Stories* contains two shorter works of Bergelson, as does the aforementioned Wisse anthology of *shtetl* novellas.)

In Kiev as well, Der Nister ("The Hidden One," pen name of Pinkhes Kahanovitsh, 1884–1950) transformed the hasidic tale into an arena for monks, mystics, and medieval dreamers to seek redemption through art and other untraditional channels. Young Bovo, the hero of "A Tale of Kings" (1920), actually succeeded. Joachim Neugroschel has brought together the largest sampling of Der Nister's symbolist tales in *Great Tales of Jewish Occult and Fantasy* (Wings Books/Outlet Book Co., 1991). When Der Nister was later forced, under pressure

from the Communist Party, to abandon storytelling in favor of critical realism, he produced the only novel in Yiddish to rival Dostoyevsky: *The Family Mashber*, translated by Leonard Wolf (Summit Books, 1987). Set in nineteenth-century Berdichev, then the commercial hub of the Ukraine, it exploited Der Nister's inside knowledge of Bratslav Hasidism—and portrayed it as an aspect of family pathology.

During Peretz's lifetime, his home in Warsaw was the obligatory pilgrimage site for all Yiddish hopeful writers. Bergelson and Der Nister both payed homage to the master. Others, like Abraham Reisen and Sholem Asch, were so taken by Peretz that they decided to stay for a while. Almost overnight, Asch became the most protean figure in Yiddish literature, producing in short order *The Shtetl*, *God of Vengeance*, a naturalist drama about lesbianism, in Joseph C. Landis's *The Great Jewish Plays* (Horizon Press, 1972), two novels about the hardships of the mass immigration to America (*America, Uncle Moses*), and a historical novel about the Cossack revolt of 1648–49, *Kiddush Ha-Shem*, translated by Rufus Learsi (Salem, N. H.: Ayer, 1975). Moving back and forth across Europe himself, he wrote a sweeping trilogy of historical upheaval in *Three Cities*, of Petersburg, Warsaw, Moscow (Carroll & Graf, 1983)—a big-screen adventure that still awaits its Cecil B. De Mille.

Warsaw, now boasting the largest Yiddish-speaking population in Europe, was also home to I. J. Singer, I. B.'s older brother. Not to be outdone by Asch, and recently disabused of his faith in Bolshevism, I. J. Singer became the chronicler of Jewish "homelessness" (see Anita Norich's *The Homeless Imagination in the Fiction of Israel Joshua Singer* [Indiana University Press, 1991]). Whether it was the hero of *Steel and Iron*, translated by Joseph Singer (Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), living under German occupation during World War I, or the legendary *Yoshe Kalb*, translated by Maurice Samuel (Schocken Books, 1988) or *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, translated by Joseph Singer (Carroll & Graf, 1985), Jewish manufacturers who took industrial Lodz by storm, Singer's verdict was everywhere the same: Jewish life and dreams were built on sand. With the knowledge of hindsight, and with greater literary skill than his brother, I. B. Singer delivered a sweeping indictment of Polish Jewry through the prism of its leading city, Warsaw, and of its leading fictional family in *The Family Moskat*, translated by A. H. Gross (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988).

But what of New York City, where both brothers Singer sought refuge in the 1930s? Here the Jewish Labor movement first came into being. Here the professional Yiddish theater first got off the ground, and here modern Yiddish poetry was first created. According to Hutchins Hapgood, whose *The Spirit of the Ghetto*

(Harvard University Press, 1983), richly illustrated by Jacob Epstein, remains the most vivid guide to the Lower East Side, it was all over even while the mass immigration was in full swing. Hapgood was ~~a Boston Brahmin turned muckraker~~ an exiled Yankee of mixed origins. His "deep throat" was the famous Abraham Cahan, soon to become czar of the *Jewish Daily Forward.* The two men saw little hope for a viable Yiddish counterculture surviving under American democratic conditions. But they were wrong, as any reader of Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* (Schocken Books, 1989) must surely know. Not only did Yiddish culture continue to flourish on the Lower East Side, later in Harlem, and other places north, south, and west, but it soon exported its goods back across the Atlantic.

The "world history" of the Yiddish theater has been pieced together by Nahma Sandrow in *Vagabond Stars* (Limelight Editions, 1986), with American Yiddish vaudeville (called *shund-teater*) occupying center stage. For a more specialized study, see Mark Slobin's *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (University of Illinois, 1982) that comes complete with an audio cassette. The future that Hapgood denied could happen is the story of Ruth R. Wisse's *A Little Love in Big Manhattan* (Harvard University Press, 1988). Choosing as her heroes the two "lions" (*leyb* in Yiddish) of American Yiddish poetry, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern and Mani Leyb (Brahinski), Wisse also surveys the Yiddish literary scene from the beginning of this century until the death of Mani Leyb, in 1953.

Surprising but true: modern Yiddish poetry began in the New World and spread from there to the Old. Thanks to the bilingual *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse,* edited by Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Chone Shmeruk (Viking Penguin, 1988), it is now possible to redraw the map of Yiddish beginning with Peretz, but then moving to America and back again. Howe's "Introduction" to Yiddish poetry in this volume is first-rate. Take, for example, the school of the Yiddish grotesque that began with Moyshe-Leyb Halpern in America and reached its apogee in Poland between the two world wars. Halpern's preoccupation with death (Peretz's, among others), his unerring eye for bourgeois hypocrisies, his "antipoetic" images and brutal rhymes—these were the underpinnings of Uri Zvi Greenberg's "Mephisto" (1921), of Yisroel Shtern's "Men Who Hunger" (c. 1928), of Leyzer Volf's "The Coarse Old Maid" (1928), of Israel Rabon's "A Funeral" (1933), and of Itzik Manger's ballads. Indeed, Yiddish modernism was a school for scandal, its members roguishly subverting just about everything that one normally associates with Yiddish—the voice of Labor, a mother's tears, a matinee idol's mixture of satire and schmaltz.

Yet because they starved and struggled alongside the rest of the Yiddish-

speaking masses, modern Yiddish poets the world over had to fight on all available fronts. Thus the six poets whom Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk selected as "the strongest, the most characteristic, and the most accessible in translation" for the *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*—Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, Itzik Manger, Moyshe Kulbak, Peretz Markish, Jacob Glatstein, and Abraham Sutzkever—these poets all doubled as prose writers, playwrights, literary critics, editors, and journalists. Those, in addition, whose career spanned the first half of the twentieth century were forced to temper their youthful exuberance, experimentation, and iconoclasm when faced with the historical fate of the Jewish people.

Glatstein co-founded the ultra-modernist movement called Introspectivism, earning him Cynthia Ozick's scorn as an aging "idolator" in her story "Envy, or Yiddish in America," in *The Pagan Rabbi* (Dutton, 1983)—co-starring a thinly disguised Isaac Bashevis Singer. With equal skill Ozick redeemed the full range of Glatstein's verse in her translations in the *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*. She began with the apocalyptic mindscape of "1919," moved on to the sexual combat of a man and two women seated at "Evening Bread." Then, in response to Hitler and the imminent destruction of Polish Jewry, Glatstein emerged as the greatest "national poet" in the Yiddish language; indeed, as the towering presence among Jewish-American poets as a whole. When not delivering a dramatic monologue in the persona of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, Glatstein the nonbeliever found a way of addressing a diminished God ("I pray from a tongue-tied page, / my woebegone God"). When not assessing the fate of his beloved language, he was casting a satiric glance at anemic suburban Judaism. Other translators who have tried their hand at Glatstein include Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, in *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (University of California, 1986), very richly illustrated, and Richard J. Fein, in *The Selected Poems of Yankev Glatshteyn* (Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

Abraham Sutzkever's modernism expressed itself in diametrically opposite ways. Not New York, but the forests outside Vilna provided the very young Sutzkever with his "world of a thousand colors" ("In the Sack of the Wind"). Not free verse and urbane speech rhythms but a profusion of rhymes and metrical schemes displayed the poet's virtuosity. Then came the Nazis, in 1941. With ghetto walls blocking all access to nature, survival itself became a nightmare ("How?"). And so the poet cast about for new analogies, new meaning, new rhyme, and he fashioned an epic of "The Lead Plates at the Rom Press" being melted down into bullets for the uprising to come. Fated to survive the Holocaust, Sutzkever chronicled "The silence of those who are no longer there" through the fleeting image of "Deer at the Red Sea." The irreconcilables of natural beauty and human barbarity,

of national destruction and rebirth finally translated into a tightly wrought sequence of metaphysical *Poems from a Diary,* the last of which (and the last in the Penguin anthology) contemplated the contradictory meanings of a blade of grass from Ponar, the slaughter site of Vilna Jewry. In *The Fiddle Rose* (Wayne State University Press, 1990), translator Ruth Whitman has selected some of Sutzkever's poetry from 1970 to 1972, revealing a lyrical muse that defies all the ruptures of this tragic century.

The example of Sutzkever points to another aspect of postwar Yiddish writing: that literature became a memorial on paper to places and people that no longer existed. Thus Sutzkever's *landsman,* Chaim Grade, announced in the Yiddish preface to *The Agunah,* translated by Curt Leviant (Menorah Publications, 1978) that henceforth he planned to rescue from oblivion the one place on the *shtetl* map where no Yiddish writer before him had dared to tread: the synagogue world of prayer and Talmud study. Grade's many novels and novellas set in and around Vilna and culminating with *The Yeshiva,* translated by Curt Leviant (Menorah Publications, 1979) and *Rabbis and Wives,* translated by Harold Rabinowitz and Inna Grade (Schocken Books, 1987), and *My Mother's Sabbath Days* (Schocken Books, 1987), stand as a memorial to the dead. As do the agnostic prayers of Jacob Glatstein. As do the metaphysical poems of Abraham Sutzkever.

Which brings us, inevitably, to the matter of catastrophe itself. Yiddish has been fated to become the memory bank of Jewish national disaster. This process began long before the Holocaust, as shown in my own book, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1986) and illustrated with a wealth of examples in the companion volume, *The Literature of Destruction* (Jewish Publication Society, 1989). As these two books demonstrate, Yiddish writing in the Nazi ghettos and concentration camps not only brought together the sum of all previous responses to catastrophe but also anticipated the themes, styles, and searching questions that were to characterize the literature of the Holocaust.

Many are the ways that Yiddish writers turned historical experience into fictional form. Leyb Rochman employed subtle novelistic techniques when recasting the day-by-day terror of the Nazi occupation in *The Pit and the Trap: A Chronicle of Survival,* translated by Moshe Kahn (Holocaust Library, 1983)—just as Elie Wiesel did in *Night* (Bantam, 1982), first published in Yiddish in 1956. By the same token, much of the poetry written in the Nazi ghettos and camps must be understood against the backdrop of earlier songs. This layering process is amply illustrated in *We Are Here: Songs of the Holocaust,* edited by Eleanor Mlotek and Malke Gottlieb (Education Department of the Workmen's Circle, 1983) and in

I. B. Singer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. (Photograph by Barbara Pfeffer)

Pearls of Yiddish Song, compiled by Eleanor and Joseph Mlotek (Workmen's Circle, 1988). The Mloteks, for example, made the astonishing discovery that *Eyli Eyli,* sung as a religious hymn during the Holocaust, was originally performed on the New York Yiddish stage—in 1896! In addition to singing—the most public vehicle of group memory—Yiddish-speaking Jews produced hundreds of *yizker-bikher,* memorial volumes to their destroyed communities in eastern Europe. These have been excerpted and ably described by Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin in *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (Schocken Books, 1985).

In a sense, *everything* written in Yiddish, even the most highbrowed experimental poetry, can be read as a response to the terrible upheavals in modern Jewish life. Benjamin Harshav sees *The Meaning of Yiddish* (University of California Press, 1990) in the achievements of Yiddish modernism against the backdrop of these exhilarating and terrifying changes, many of them, as he stresses, undertaken voluntarily by a people that wanted out—out of the "ghetto" at any price. As Harshav tells it, Sholem Aleichem too must be understood as a modernist rebel!

If Yiddish functions primarily as metaphor for Jews and Americans of the present generation, reading Yiddish literature in translation greatly enriches that metaphoric field. Those Yiddish works that appear on the surface to be most folksy, most true to the norms of "*shtetl* society" emerge upon closer inspection to be careful acts of camouflage, studied attempts on the part of very modern writers to reimagine themselves as members of the folk. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, and Manger taught I. B. Singer everything he needed to know about the art of folk simulation. The *shtetl* itself, it turns out, was a useful myth of origins invented by writers who could never go home again.

When Yiddish writers turned to unabashedly modern pursuits—the writing of novels, memoirs, expressionist or introspective verse—there were always countervailing forces pulling them back to the fold. The murderous attempts of Hitler and Stalin to solve the Jewish Problem once and for all convinced Yiddish writers that they could not remain above the fray. Many perished, among them the stellar group of Soviet-Yiddish writers whom Stalin purged between 1936 and 1952. Howe and Greenberg captured their collective fate in the title of their book *Ashes Out of Hope: Fiction by Soviet-Yiddish Writers* (Schocken Books, 1978). This reengagement with the folk and its fate, as we have seen, was often accompanied by a negotiated return to the forms of folk creativity as well: to folk songs, folktales, and the whole legendary landscape of Jewish eastern Europe. And when they lost their Yiddish-reading audience to mass murder or assimilation, Yiddish writers turned increasingly to other media. I. J. Singer adapted his novels for Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater and won a ticket to America in the bargain. I. B. Singer preferred to let Barbra Streisand and Paul Mazursky write the screen adaptations for him. Anyway, on the screen, the best one could hope for was a Yiddishized English—and that Riverside Drive in the heat of the summer would look like Central Park West in the snow.