

Emily Katz

LIT 5506

April 29, 2003

So Altered, So Familiar:

New York Landscapes in *Enemies: A Love Story*

For a generation of East European Jews, the immigrant narrative of passage and rebirth in the New World was rooted in the streets and tenements of New York City. The Lower East Side quickly became the axis mundi, the space in which everyone and everything that mattered to one's *new* life, to one's future, was densely concentrated. Yiddish writing in America both reflected and shaped this reality, its practitioners inhabiting and mapping the spaces and places of immigrant life, from the sweatshops to the subways, the literary cafe to the Yiddish theater, from Coney Island to the Bronx. New York exemplified the quickened struggle between old and new, the city's churning crowds and magisterial skyscrapers encapsulations of the muscular strivings (economic and artistic) for a brighter tomorrow.

This landscape of immigrant desire surfaces as a shadow topography in *Enemies, A Love Story*, Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel of love and betrayal, destruction and redemption in post-Holocaust New York. The exploits of Singer's shattered refugee protagonist, Herman Broder, unfurl against a backdrop familiar to any student of Yiddish literature in America. Only here, for Herman, New York is not a point of embarkation, but a station at the end of the world, its streets and residences the threshold of purgatory. In a sense, place is superfluous to Herman. Superimposing his past on the present, the city is merely a warren of potential hideouts, its denizens, shapeshifting Nazis. On the other hand, however, New York embodies perfectly Herman's fragmented existence. As Singer traces Herman's arc between his three loves—Yadwiga, Masha, and Tamara—from Coney Island to the Bronx to the Lower East Side and back again, the book becomes a kind of travelogue of the city. Within the

schema of the novel, each woman acts as patron saint of the place that she inhabits, so that the map of the city and the diagram of Herman's desire merge into one. Thus, Coney Island and Yadviga form one vector of Herman's longing and regret, the Bronx and Masha another, and Tamara and the Lower East Side a third.

The book begins not on the Lower East Side, that immigrant portal to the new world, but in Herman's bedroom in Coney Island, in a bourgeois apartment building inhabited by old refugee couples. The first moment of the novel is a collision of polar realities, as Herman awakens from a terrifying nightmare to the well ordered universe of his apartment in postwar Brooklyn. The domestic angel who rules this tidy world—Herman's wife Yadviga—is also the bridge between nightmare and reality: Formerly a domestic servant in his childhood home, the simple and devoted Yadviga saved Herman's life (and risked her own) by hiding him in a hayloft during the years of the Nazi occupation. Instrument of his salvation, Yadviga is also an implacable reminder of the hell of the Holocaust, of the world that Herman lost, and of his estrangement from his own religion and community.

In part, Coney Island symbolizes precisely what it did for the immigrant generation: the promise of American abundance and gratification. In an early passage, Herman allows himself to be seduced, if momentarily, by the pleasures of the place. On his walk to the subway, Herman encounters "crates and bushel baskets of oranges, bananas, cherries, strawberries, and tomatoes" basking in the sunlight, along with the carnival melange of carousels and shooting galleries, popcorn and cotton candy; the ocean glints in the distance (17). An ersatz garden of earthly delights, Coney Island's charm is bound up with its strident fakery: "The richness of the color, the abundance, the freedom—cheap and shoddy as everything was—surprised Herman each time he saw it," as Singer writes(18). What's more, there is something indelibly, irrepressibly Jewish about Coney Island to Herman, for whom the whiff of chopped liver in the air and last year's High Holy Days posters on the walls signify unalloyed freedom from persecution, even if he cannot fully trust or embrace it.

But the Coney Island of *Enemies* is also a landscape of dissonance and alienation. If Herman is able to apprehend the unique pleasures of this workaday paradise, he is ever attuned to the decrepit reality behind the airbrushed stage set. A clinging dust blows in to his apartment from the oceanfront, impossible to fully scrub away, just as the nearby sea delivers a "stench of putrefaction" and a vista of shipwrecks (15). Herman carefully catalogues the melancholy effect of the changing seasons on Coney Island, like a doctor reporting on a dying patient. On Yom Kippur, the landscape wallows in desolation; as Herman observes from his window, the Boardwalk is deserted, the shops closed, the neighborhood "so quiet that...he could hear the roar of the waves" (148). Bereft of people, shabby and neglected, Coney Island in winter is nothing but an empty carcass. It is, in fact, the mirror image of Herman himself as he emerges in the novel, with his weary and wasted body, his crumpled visage.

While an off-season Coney Island reflects Herman's own psychic isolation and encroaching physical decay, the neighborhood also exemplifies the community that Herman seeks to escape. It is the site of prying neighbors, and especially of the Yiddish-speaking *balebostes* who initiate Yadwiga into the ways of Judaism and American consumption, despite Herman's efforts to fortify his "enchanted palace" against them. Taking her to synagogue, teaching her Yiddish, gossiping and cajoling, Yadwiga's Coney Island neighbors incorporate her into the rhythms of middle-class Jewish life, American-style:

These women, with little else to do, instructed Yadwiga in Judaism, showed her how to buy bargains, warned her about being exploited by her husband. An American housewife must have a vacuum cleaner, an electric mixer, an electric steam iron, and, if possible, a dishwasher. The apartment must be insured against fire and theft; Herman must take out a life-insurance policy; she must dress better and not go around in peasant's rags....In Yadwiga's mind, the insurance policy and the dishwasher were both necessary aspects of Jewish observances. (178)

Over Herman's objections, veiled and explicit, Yadwiga befriends the neighbors, goes to shul, speaks back, becomes pregnant; against his will, his Coney Island fortress

becomes a conduit of community, a passage to the future.

If Coney Island represents a viable avenue forward, the Bronx is truly a dead end, despite the fact that it, too, once symbolized the American dream for a generation of upwardly mobile New York Jews. It is Herman's other home, where he rooms in a dilapidated house with his mistress Masha (a survivor whom he met in the DP camps) and her pious mother. Spied from the lofty heights of the elevated Bronx Express, the landscape is as forlorn as Coney Island in winter: "Even though the buildings didn't seem old," Singer writes, "an air of age and decay hovered over the city" (31). The Bronx still offers greenery and birdsong, where "trees and grass [grow]...just as they would in the middle of a field," and residents congregate in leafy parks; but as Herman approaches Masha's block, the setting withers palpably, like the woods around a witch's hut in a fairy tale. Her street

...had only a few houses, separated by empty lots overgrown with weeds. There was an old warehouse, with bricked-up windows and a gate that was always shut....A "For Sale" sign hung on an empty house whose windows had been knocked out. It seemed to Herman that the street couldn't make up its mind whether to remain part of the neighborhood or to give up and disappear. (32)

Here again, the landscape forms itself according to the contours of Herman's own mind; from Herman's perspective, the Bronx is the American dream horribly corroded, a place of thwarted life (as will turn out literally to be the case, with Masha's illusionary pregnancy).

Herman's room is both a lovers' nest and a prison cell. It is the cauldron in which Herman and Masha's potent alchemy of love and anger boils; there, Masha plays a perverse Sheherezade, plying Herman with tales of depraved exploits in war-torn Europe, and consuming everything in sight—cigarettes, chocolate, Herman himself—until dawn. Masha is a furnace of rage, her wrenching memories of the Holocaust her fuel for living. The room in Masha's house where Herman sleeps takes on the mesmerizing, suffocating aura of her personality:

It was hot. He often wondered why the room didn't set itself on fire from the high temperature. On particularly turgid evenings, he imagined flames bursting forth from the ceiling, the walls, the bedding, the books and manuscripts. He stretched out on the bed, alternately dozing and brooding....(94)

The place becomes ever more claustrophobic as the novel progresses. The bleakest moments in the book occur here, in quick succession: the bloody denouement to Masha's false pregnancy, and her resulting illness; a devastating robbery; Shifrah Puah's final conscious hours; and finally, Masha's suicide. It is here that Masha's fiery passion curdles into near insanity. Her room becomes a place of nightmares, where "[h]er father appeared to her in his shrouds, shouting verses from the Bible in her ear," and "fantastic beasts with coiled horns and pointed snouts...barked, roared, and drooled over her" in her sleep (210). It is a haunted house.

If Herman's Bronx is the cradle of Masha's black magic and a burrow of growing madness, it is also one more forlorn outpost from which he may assess the nightmarish world, and the cold, cruel universe beyond. From this "tiny room with a single window overlooking a small yard" (40), just as from the large windows of his well tended apartment in Coney Island (or, for that matter, from his godly perch on the Bronx Express), Herman can judge and condemn all he sees. In a reversal of creation, Masha's home becomes an unholy place of emptiness, darkness, and death, and Herman feels himself the last man on earth:

He stood at the window, looking out into the night. The tree, whose every leaf had reflected the play of sunlight a few hours earlier, now stood black against the darkness. A single star twinkled in the reddish, glowing sky....Shouts, traffic noises, and the muffled roar of the El echoed in the distance. Herman experienced a melancholy more intense than any he had ever felt before. (268)

Alone at the window, surveying the void, Herman too is "only a helpless godlet," a sentient speck of dust in the universe (123).

If anyone commands the status of an otherworldly being, though, it is not

Herman but Tamara, whose seeming resurrection from the dead signals a sort of second chance for her long lost (and long estranged) husband. Tamara, who Herman had recalled as contrarious and superficial, has emerged from the Holocaust resolute and selfless. Fully cognizant of both the heights and depths of human behavior, Tamara evinces a knowing rectitude that stands her in stark contrast to benighted Yadwiga and unscrupulous Masha. The postwar Lower East Side is an especially fitting haunt for Tamara; both landscape and character appear as the surviving remnants of a largely vanished world, adapted to the present but anchored in the Jewish past, each a receptacle of communal memory. If the city is a palimpsest, so is Tamara, a collage of the old world, the current world, and *yene velt*.

"Sometimes I remember everything and sometimes nothing," Tamara tells Herman (73), a sentiment that could be the Lower East Side's own epitaph. There, past and present mingle promiscuously. Riding the bus through the neighborhood on the way to his reunion with Tamara, Herman scans the scene, so altered and so familiar. The neighborhood seems to revert to its Jewish self, as if by magic, the deeper he travels into it:

The neighborhood had changed since his arrival in America. Now many Puerto Ricans lived there. Whole blocks of buildings had been torn down. Nevertheless, one still occasionally saw a sign in Yiddish and, here and there, a synagogue, a yeshiva, a home for the aged....The bus passed kosher restaurants, a Yiddish film-theater, a ritual bath, a hall that could be rented for weddings or bar mitzvahs, and a Jewish funeral parlor. Herman saw young boys with earlocks longer than any he had seen in Warsaw, their heads covered by broad brimmed hats.

....On East Broadway...he glimpsed through a basement window a group of white-bearded men studying the Talmud.....The faces of the old men reflected a stubborn grief as ancient as the books they studied. For an instant Herman toyed with the idea of joining them. (66-67)

The sons and daughters of the immigrant generation dispersed to the outer boroughs and beyond, the immigrant tide long since dammed up, the Lower East Side has become a kind of Avalon for steadfast stragglers and refugees, existing in a parallel

space and time. Herman does indeed “toy with the idea of joining” this rarefied realm—hence his religious epiphany partway through the novel, which he cannot sustain. Home and haven, the Lower East Side is also a world apart, a place that Herman simply cannot inhabit (and never could).

While Tamara herself no longer believes in God—“souls exist; it’s God who doesn’t,” she intones (83)—she remains connected to the body of the Jewish people. She serves as a kind of *memorbuch*, recounting stories and deeds of the dead and the nearly dead—of the former rabbi of Old Dzikow, who observed the Sabbath even in the hell of a Soviet labor camp; of his mother, who “gave away the last of what she owned,” to help others (82); of the boy, now a Catskills waiter, who was liberated from the very maw of the ovens. She also converses with the dead, her (and Herman’s) murdered children joining her at night and vanishing with daybreak.

Like Herman, Tamara recognizes that Judaism itself remains a viable, morally sound link between past, present and future; and like Herman, she is unable to reinvent herself as a believer. And yet, as the novel ends, Tamara does embody a certain redemption, if not ultimately for herself or for Herman, than for the next generation. Indeed, Tamara replaces Herman, who forfeits his place in the community (and perhaps among the living), disappearing without a trace. Presiding over a Judaica bookstore on the Lower East Side (bequeathed by her uncle), Tamara tends to the vestiges—books and people alike—of the Jewish world; with a Jewish Yadviga and her newborn daughter in her care, Tamara creates a new community in place of the old. The novel ends where many an immigrant narrative began—on the Lower East Side, once again a place of rebirth and reinvention, the portal to a new world.