

**The Heart-Stirring Sermon and Other Stories.** By Avraham Reisen. Edited and translated from the Yiddish by Curt Leviant. Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, \$23.95, 204 pp.

Avraham Reisen enjoyed an extraordinary esteem among Yiddish readers during his lifetime. As Curt Leviant tells us in his excellent introduction to *The Heart-Stirring Sermon and Other Stories*, no less an authority than the writer B.Z. Goldberg, Sholom Aleichem's son-in-law, said, "After the great classical triumvirate of Mendele, Peretz and Sholom Aleichem, Reisen is the fourth. He is the fist of the new generation of Yiddish writers, both in popularity and the people's affection."

Reisen, born in the Lithuanian shtetl Kaidanov in 1876, published his first poem at 15, and his first short story at the ripe old age of 16. His works thereafter appeared with ever greater frequency in Yiddish journals throughout the world, although his earnings — along with those of his European colleagues — remained dishearteningly meager. He became a central figure in Yiddish literary circles, hobnobbing with the likes of Peretz and H.D. Bergson — the older generation of Yiddish writers — and with such up-and-coming youngsters as Sholom Asch. He was an active participant in the seminal Czernovitz Conference, which proclaimed Yiddish a national language of the Jewish people, raising its prestige. He gave readings of his works. He edited a Yiddish magazine. His acclaim grew.

In 1914, at the age of 40, he permanently settled in America. And, as Leviant tells us, he began to publish a short story each week in such Yiddish magazines as *Der Tog*, *Di Freiheit*, and the *Di Vort*, as well as in numerous Yiddish periodicals. His livelihood was more or less secured. He wrote novels, short plays, literary criticism; became an editor, publisher and translator. A 12-volume edition of his short stories and poems appeared in 1917. His prodigious output continued unabated. When he died in 1953, a much-revered figure, his works had

already been translated into many languages.

Yet today, Reisen's name is hardly a household word. And *The Heart-Stirring Sermon* is the very first collection of his short stories to appear in English. Why?

For one thing, Reisen's stories are in the Yiddish tradition of *edelkeit* — gentility, refinement, delicacy. The baser instincts are skirted. Reisen's characters do not engage in fistfights, drink to excess, have illicit affairs — in fact, sex is never mentioned — or even



Avraham Reisen

curse. The genial, ever helpful, always encouraging, Reisen, remained a beloved figure in Yiddish literary circles, but it was this type of writing that the younger Yiddish writers — such as Zelman Schneour, Joseph Opatoshu, Sholom Asch, and somewhat later, I.J. Singer, and still later, his brother, I.B. Singer — rebelled against.

Then, Reisen's short stories are really little more than sketches. There are few truly dramatic scenes, almost no plot lines, and the characters are archetypes rather than fully developed individuals. In the Yiddish original of "Reisele" — a tale of dire poverty that concludes in the wrenching separation of mother and child — the mother is simply "the mother"; she acquires a name only when being addressed by a peer in the story. Leviant, in the second paragraph of his translation, wisely inserts her name — Chiyeneh — and

continues to do so, thus humanizing her.

Leviant cites Reisen's three basic themes: the shtetl and its poverty; the life of a young Jewish intellectual away from home; and how the new world changed the old world Jew — and rarely for the better. The stories in this collection were taken from one Yiddish volume of selected stories, published in 1952. Reisen himself approved the contents. He favored his early shtetl stories, which predominate in the Yiddish compilation, and even more so in this shorter English volume.

In these stories one finds a bit of mild irony, sentimentality galore, and tons of compassion for the endless suffering of Reisen's characters. The women, obvious "second-class citizens" in this traditional environment, are mostly ignorant, fearful and often browbeaten or ignored by their husbands. The men are all overwhelmed by poverty; they are truly downtrodden, defeated, timid and utterly hopeless.

In "The Free Loan," the desperate Chaim blows his chance to borrow some money from his rich neighbor. The story ends in his humiliation. Zlateh, in "Holy Books," is also humiliated. "She deeply regretted her foolish deed: letting her son take her woman's Yiddish Bible to air out with so many of the men's holy books." In "The Two Young Brothers," Yankel and Berele, sent to a neighboring shtetl to live with a poor relative, pine for their father. The story ends with: "...and the brother's sobs shook the little house." In "Reisele," the story also ends in the little girl's hopeless tears of loneliness and longing. In "When Does Mama Eat," a small boy is tormented by the thought that his overworked mother never eats. In "The Last Hope," the destitute Leizer, finally goes off in despair to borrow money he and the reader know he will never receive.

Stories not exactly suited for modern sensibilities.

And yet, as the Yiddish poet and critic Jacob Glatstein once remarked to Irving Howe: "If every record of Yiddish life [in Eastern Europe] were lost, a future archaeologist could reconstruct



all from the stories of Reisen." And in truth, these sketches — for all their imitations — are masterfully done. They can be likened to delicate water colors rather than large oil paintings. Reisen's touch was always sure. His ear for dialogue pitch perfect. He was a renowned Yiddish poet, and some of his stories read like prose poems in Yiddish. Hints of this are to be found in this translation.

His original audience knew all of Reisen's allusions, but they have become quite arcane to us now. Leviant's annotations for each story and his glossary of Yiddish words are invaluable. It is no mean trick translating Reisen's unadorned Yiddish, but Leviant has done an admirable job.

Reisen can now take his rightful place in translation beside his great friends, the other masters of modern Yiddish literature.

— Isidore Haiblum

**A Pioneer Woman: The Memoirs of Bert Goldstein.** By Bert Goldstein. Woodmere, N.Y.: Gefen Books, \$22.95, 398 pp.

*A Pioneer Woman: The Memoirs of Bert Goldstein* is very aptly titled. For Bert was not only elected as the first national president of Pioneer Women, the Women's Labor Zionist Organization of America (now NA'AMAT USA), but she was also, by nature, personality and in all her endeavors, a successful "pioneer." At a very tender age, she chose to leave her parents and sisters to remain on her grandparents' farm in Franklin Falls, New York. She learned to drive a car at a time when cars were a novelty, and throughout her life, she undauntedly undertook adventures and challenges, never hesitating to do what she considered right or necessary.

In her memoirs, she relates events in her fascinating life with humor and frankness. When she feels the need to be critical of people or movements, she expresses herself freely.

Married at an early age to Dr. Israel Goldstein, a noted rabbi and General Zionist leader, Bert nevertheless chose to ally herself with the Labor Zionist Movement and Pioneer Women. She sat on the opposite side of the political Zionist scene, and openly differed with the philosophy of Dr. Goldstein's movement.

Her love of nature, her eagerness to learn, her keen analysis of people and problems come out very clearly in her descriptions of the trip around the world that she took with Dr. Goldstein in 1959. They met with Jews wherever they lived — in the ghettos of Morocco and India, and in the more affluent countries of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Wherever there was a Jewish community, small or large, she and Dr. Goldstein spoke of Israel and made appeals for funds for the United Israel Appeal. She met with Pioneer Women wherever they existed,



Bert Goldstein, first national president of Pioneer Women, around 1947.

and was invited to speak and inspire them to greater activity for Jewish education and Israel.

The book is wonderfully descriptive of the beauty of the countries, the mountains, rivers, waterfalls, animal life — always relating to her love of country life. Bert's vivid accounts of the native populations — their dress, customs, work, dance, and even their poverty — are remarkable and perceptive.

The book relates many pioneering ventures, such as Bert's meeting with the refugees in post-World War II Europe and emigrés from North Africa, traveling with them on a dangerously overcrowded ship through rough seas to Haifa. She writes of her efforts to organize a group of women to work on the beautification of Jerusalem (when

she settled there in 1960), to keep the city clean. She helped teach new immigrants how to cooperate (no mean task), set up a committee and raised funds for a scholarship program at The Hebrew University to help capable women to pursue advanced degrees. She was instrumental in launching a building fund project of Pioneer Women for a Graduate Library School at The Hebrew University in memory of Sophie Udin, Pioneer Women leader and librarian. The auditorium was dedicated to Eleanor Roosevelt, who in 1964 participated in the dedication of the school.

A Zionist from birth, her farewell speech to Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City (where Dr. Goldstein had been the rabbi during his entire professional life), expressed the yearning to be a part of the cause that they had espoused all their lives and was to be the fulfillment of their dreams. She credited Pioneer Women with helping her to weave the pattern of her life.

Although the book relates to the decision of NA'AMAT USA and Na'amat Israel to build a Women's Center in Bert's name in Be'er Tuvia in honor of her 95th birthday, it was already in print before the completion and dedication of the building at the end of 1991 in her 96th year.

The Association of Americans and Canadians in Israel, of which she is a member, the Sophie Udin club, Na'amat, Haifa University, the University Women and many, many more with affiliations play a role in the chapters about her life in Jerusalem. The designation of "Distinguished Citizen of Jerusalem" bestowed upon her by the City of Jerusalem, was well merited and was the title of "Honorary Member of the World Zionist Organization."

The book is well worth reading and depicts the long and productive life of a vibrant, dynamic personality whose life has been devoted to the Jewish people, Zionism and Israel.

— Esther Zack

**A History of the Jews in America.** Howard M. Sachar. New York: Alfred A Knopf, \$40.00, 1,051 pp.

Author of definitive histories of European Jewry, Israel and the Middle East, Professor Howard M. Sachar