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Yiddish Writers Unmasked

David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*. Harvard University Press; 407pp.

Reviewed by Kenneth Turan

For all practical purposes, Yiddish literature is no more. Deprived of its audience and its greatest practitioners by the harsh forces of history, it lives largely in the works of the great names of the past, writers such as Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz and Isaac Bashevis Singer — writers, David Roskies argues in this fascinating and persuasive new book, who were not at all what modern readers make them out to be.

As both the literary world these authors lived in and the traditional one they wrote about slip further and further away in time, the tendency is great to lump it all together, to assume that Sholem Aleichem, Peretz and the rest lived the kind of shtetl lives they wrote about, were in effect next-door neighbors to Tevye the Milkman and the whole "Fiddler on the Roof" crowd.

Not so, says Roskies, Professor of Jewish Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, in this insightful and erudite study. Yiddish writers were rather cosmopolitan sophisticates who for a variety of reasons "began to reimagine themselves as members of the folk." They were literary craftsmen who rediscovered and then refashioned traditional stories and did it so successfully that today their recreations seem like original folk tales. Roskies calls this process "creative betrayal" (a term he does not intend pejoratively) and he makes a strong case for it as the central pattern of the literature.

Though most such histories start in the mid-19th century with the man usually considered the "father of Yiddish literature," Sholem Abramovitsh (writing as Mendele Moykher Sforim, Mendele the Bookseller), Roskies begins half a century further back, with Reb Nahman



of Bratislav (1772-1810), the grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement, and the first "to place storytelling at the center of his creative life."

Before Nahman, the telling of tales did not have an exalted place in Jewish tradition. As he himself said: "They say that stories can put you to sleep but I say that through stories you can awaken people from their sleep." Determined to infuse his followers with his own messianic sensibility, Nahman turned to stories in Yiddish when all else failed.

His thirteen intricate, demanding fables, Roskies says, were "the sum of everything that came before and the harbinger of the revival to come. He changed ... the way future generations of Jewish writers were to view the art of storytelling, the way we, in retrospect, read Jewish tales and the way we write about them."

Passing lightly over Mendele, Roskies, in his book's biggest chapter, focuses on the often neglected Isaac Meir Dik, an enormously popular writer who used pulpier plot lines ("Sholem the Peddler" fought a bear bare-handed in a typical effort) to teach homiletic lessons and perhaps bring Judaism more in line with modern times.

With Nahman and Dik, Roskies hypothesizes, "two types of Yiddish storytellers were inaugurated: the romantic-messianic storytellers, who mined the fund of other-worldly plots to achieve a revolution of the spirit, and the tellers of grotesque-sentimental tales, who exploited ancient and local lore to restore the Jewish body politic."

This pattern of rediscovering a past they hadn't experienced and putting it to a particular use was repeated by the two giants of the literature. Sholem Aleichem, for instance, who in Tevye created a character so real "the audience mistook it for ethnography," had in real life been a stockbroker living in Kiev, a city forbidden to almost all Jews.

And Peretz, "the master architect of Jewish modernism," first made use of folk material merely to mock it but then, later in his career, executed a complete change of direction. Believing that a connection with what had come before was essential to emerging secular Jewish nationalism, he "smartened up the traditional tales in order to seduce wayward Jews back to their discarded past."

By 1921, all the founding fathers of Yiddish literature were gone, and those who followed had more dangerous forces

to contend with as they "entered a period of high political stakes when the utopian path one took would be a matter of life and death."

No one paid a higher price than Der Nister, the Hidden One, the pen name of Pinkhes Kahanovitsh, best known to readers of Yiddish in translation as the author of the epic *The Family Mashber*. Roskies, however, is more interested in Der Nister's earlier, symbolist works, again based on traditional stories but written with the visionary hope of transforming mankind through art. Der Nister took the path leading from Berlin to the Soviet Union in 1926, a decision that was to cost him his life.

The final third of Roskies's book is taken up with writers whose careers were decimated by the Holocaust. Itzik Manger chose to write in ballad form, looking to wedding jesters and the like for inspiration and turning out a charming retelling of the Bible, "a Yiddish folk epic to outlast the living folk, the living language, the living landscape."

As for Isaac Bashevis Singer, Yiddish's only Nobel Prize winner, he discovered in revisiting the past that in Roskies's words, "the devil is the model storyteller, for he has read more, seen more, and remembered more than any other person living or dead, and he harbors no illusions about the perfectability of man."

Roskies devotes a final chapter to writers like Y.I. Trunk, Abraham Sutzkever and Yosl Birstein, who did their most noteworthy work after the Holocaust. And like the authors he writes about, Roskies has given himself the luxury of picking and choosing among the Yiddish past, having little to say, for instance, about such popular writers as Sh. Ansky, Chaim Grade and Sholem Asch.

But this book makes one agree with Michael Goldman, director of the Klezmer documentary "A Jumpin' Night in the Garden of Eden": "What an amazing home Jewish culture is," he wrote Roskies, "that generation after generation ends up straggling back, our pockets stuffed with the flotsam and jetsam of the world beyond." It is a process that, as this book proves, shows no sign of abating.

Kenneth Turan is chairman of the Board of Directors of the National Yiddish Book Center. An earlier version of this review appeared in The Los Angeles Times.