

"When we arrived at Isaac Bashevis Singer's home on West 86th Street," Isidore Haiblum relates, "he was in the midst of a translation project with his secretary. He obviously had forgotten about the interview, but he was most gra-

cious and ushered us into the living room, where he set us at ease. We spoke with him in Yiddish for a while, and then began the interview. 'Ask me anything you like,' Singer told us. He was enjoying himself. Our Yiddish introduc-

tion may have helped. And then, noticing the young lady in our interviewing party, he beamed: 'I will get a divorce, I will come to you, you will provide for me.' Participating in the interview for MOMENT, along with Mr. Haiblum, who is a sci-

ence fiction writer and "Yiddishophile," were Adrienne Joy Cooper, a fellow at the Max Weinreich Center for Advanced Jewish Studies, and David Neal Miller, who teaches in the Yiddish program at Queens College.

# an interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer

Moment: *It was your book, The Family Moskat, which gave me my Jewish heritage, to a large extent.*

Singer: It's nice to hear, nice to hear. I do not expect to hear such things, but I keep hearing them all the time, and I'm all the time astonished, just the same. I never believed that a work of fiction could do anything. It's just made for entertainment. And now, I hear other things. Still, I think entertainment is its basic purpose. If it gives something else, it's a bonus. But if it does not entertain, if it only teaches or gives you messages, then it's not literature. You can call it by any other name—philosophy, psychology, sociology, but it's not enough to make it literature. Whatever else, it must be a gift.

*For me, your writing is a gift.*

Thank you. It's a gift to hear that.

*I'll just say a few more words.*

You can say many words. But which of you is going



Photographs by Bill Powers

to do the interview?

*This is the interview.*

Oh. Would you like a chair or something? Are you comfortable?

*Yes, I'm delighted to be here. I grew up speaking two languages.*

Wait. Take this chair. Give him this chair. No, this chair, not that chair. I also know a little bit the human condition, to know when you are comfortable, and when you are not.

*I was saying that I grew up speaking two languages, English and Yiddish. American heroes I knew about from movies. I read about them in books. But I*

*didn't know what an exciting, cosmopolitan life was going on in Warsaw between the two World Wars until I read your books.*

The truth is that the Jewish novel has not yet been written. Jewish life is so rich, and so adventurous, and so unbelievable, that no matter what you do you can't over-describe. These twelve million people, or whatever their number, are doing more things than twelve hundred million people. No question about it. They read all the books, they go to all the shows, they write all the shows, they write almost all the books, they travel everywhere. There is not an adventure or a *meshugas*

that they don't take part. There is not a good deed that they don't contribute. There is not a nonsense that they also don't take part. To know the Jews is really to know the universe. So whatever a writer does is really almost nothing.

I was brought up in Warsaw, and there the Yiddish literature was part of the tradition: pedestrian, slow, telling stories which were obvious, you know. But I said to myself, how is this possible? How is it that this great nation is so provincial, so primitive? And I felt a kind of rebellion. When I tried to do what I thought I should do, they said I was sinning against the Yiddish tradition. The tradition was always to tell a story about a shtetl, a rich girl who fell in love with a poor boy, and she loved him so much that she married him anyhow.

The reason why Jewish literature has not developed more is because Jews live in all the languages. To know the Jews you have to know the whole earth. And since no one knows all the languages, no one can really know Jewish literature.



*Haven't you also done some translations?*

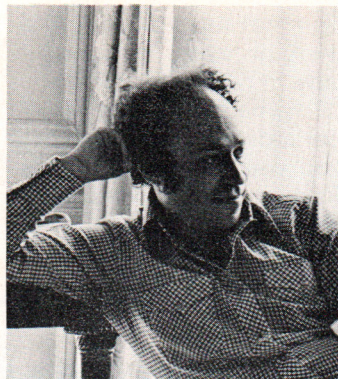
Yes, I have translated Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and some others, but I feel I have done nothing. I didn't do them as carefully as I might have, but the Yiddish readers were so eager to get in touch with the rest of the world that a bad translation was better than none.

*Did the translations help you in your writing?*

I would say that everything a writer does, everything he sees, is part of his writing. You came to this interview, I see your faces, you are already a part of my impression. If I need it, I can use it.



*Many of your characters spend much of their effort trying to figure out why things happen—a task which they often despair of. In one of your stories, you wrote, "The world is full of puzzles. It's possible that not even Elijah will be able to answer all of our questions when the Messiah comes. Even God in*



*the seventh heaven may not have solved all the mysteries of His creation. This may be the reason He conceals His face."*

Yes, I would say the function of literature, among other things, is to make the unbelievable believable. As a rule, people don't believe in any unusual things, except when they happen to them. For instance, if you go on the street, and you suddenly see your dead great-grandmother, or you have a dog in the house, and this dog suddenly begins to talk to you, you would not call yourself a liar, because you saw it. But if your neighbor tells it to you, you say he's a liar. People cannot believe anything except the usual things, and it's the function of literature to show that the unbelievable does not happen only to you—but to other people also.

Actually, the history of humanity is the history of unbelievable things. People are created so they don't believe in unbelievable things, because it would destroy the laws of nature and the order of society. But a real writer sees these unbelievable things, and tries to stress them. So pure realism, pure naturalism, is actually the very opposite of literature. Take a man like Solzhenitsyn. Even though he's a man with great—unbelievable—courage, his writing is believable. The things

that are unbelievable in his writing are unbelievable because of Russia, not because of his writing. As a rule he has not much fantasy, not much humor. He's a reporter. But again, his courage is unbelievable. When everyone was afraid, he had no fear whatsoever, and they let him go.

*Do you feel yourself part of an American or Yiddish intellectual community, or do you feel isolated?*

No. Because these things really depend on fashions. Today the fashion is romanticism, the next day it's futurism. The very fact that everything becomes an "ism" means that they



live according to issues. A school of thought is created, and if you dare to go against it, they punish you. This is happening right now here. When you read the book reviews of the *New York Times*, you'll see that there is a certain kind of cliché, in the broader sense of the word, going



on. When they talk about the human condition, they will name Dostoevski and Kafka, as if these two were everything.

*But now you're fashionable also. Does that make you feel exploited?*

Well, again, I may be fashionable today, and tomorrow they may say somebody else is fashionable. I'm always prepared for these things. But actually, this is unavoidable, it's human nature. Most probably, it has to be like this. Because if every human being had his own way, there would never have been any society. It seems that a society needs people who follow a leader.



*Of all your characters, it seems that your female narrators are the only ones not at a loss to explain what is going on. They grope back for some kind of folksaying and find an answer that makes sense.*

This is a wonderful method to be used in writing, if the writer has a sense for language. When an old woman sits down and tells a story, she doesn't worry about style. Or repetition, or anything else except the story. My Aunt Yentl had a number of sayings that I use in my stories. Now when she would tell a story, she wouldn't worry about anything except the story. Since I rarely would write myself in such a



mixed-up style, I sometimes let my aunt or some other person tell a particular story. Women are especially good at telling stories, and telling about unusual things. In other words, I would say, in literature, like in sex, the less you make an effort, the more you succeed.

*You said that as a writer you felt somewhat alone in America. How about as a person? How do you feel as a person in American society?*

I'll tell you. As a person I feel like every other person. Why was I born? When will I die? What will be later? This feeling of bewilderment was with me all my life. I remember myself at two years, looking around, and asking myself, not in words, actually, what's going on here? There was a pig and a dog and a sky—and I'm just as much astonished now as I was then. I don't feel I really belong to American society—I feel I belong to something which I don't understand. We are all

pasture I see a cow, I see it lift up its face to ask, why am I a cow? Why do I eat grass all day? What's going on here? And this is how I feel almost all the time. But since I can't go around all the time and just wonder, I do my work, whatever I have to do. I pay the taxes, I do everything which I must do.



*If there had been a continuation of Jewish life and culture in Poland, do you feel you would be a different person now, writing different books for a different audience?*

I don't know what I would do. The only thing I can tell you is that, even back then, I had this feeling that I didn't belong. People were all so sure of their convictions. The Zionists were sure, the Communists were sure. I was inclined more to Zionism than to Communism, there's no question about that. But again, this being sure, which is characteristic of the man of action, was never with me. And this is the reason why I,

never really did anything. Except scribbling, you know. I could never go into any political things, you know, like saying Carter is going to be the best President, or Reagan. I don't have, completely, any convictions, except one: since we all suffer anyhow terribly, there is no reason why we should add more suffering to other people. As much as you can, try not to add to the troubles of people. Not that I am convinced that this is the rule of the Almighty. But I think this is my own kind of conviction.

My morality, my ethics, if I have any, is based just on a feeling. Not on any philosophy. From a philosophical point of view, you cannot prove that Hitler was wrong, and Gandhi was right.

*How do you feel about a revival of Yiddish, as a language?*

The truth is, if we would be a normal people, I would say it's impossible. If you would say that the Germans would begin again to speak German in the United States, I would say it can't happen. Or the French. But the Jews—anything can happen. Because they are so *meshugeh*. So unusual, and so abnormal, that you cannot really predict anything. It can happen. See what happened to Hebrew. For almost two thousand years Hebrew was a dead language. Suddenly a few



young people decided to go back to Israel, and a man, Ben Yehudah, decided to revive Hebrew, and it's there. So you can't predict.

*All of us here decided to learn Yiddish in college.*

So, you are Yiddishists. If somebody would have told me forty years ago that babies born in Brooklyn or in Queens would grow up to speak Yiddish in the 1970's, I would have said it's impossible. But here you sit and speak Yiddish. And you speak beautiful Yiddish. You were born in this country?

*We were all born in this country.*

So if it could happen to you, why can't it happen to others? However, I would not say yes, and I would not say no. I see it's happening in a small way, because you are really the exceptions among the exceptions. But you never know. One day you are an exception, the next day you are the rule.



small parts of some great machine, or whatever it is, which we shall never really know as long as we are alive. Maybe after death we will know, maybe never. It's a riddle, living in a riddle. I would say that every human being shares this, and also animals. Sometimes when I walk alone somewhere, and in a



*Are there any young Yiddish writers?*

No.

*Anyone who brings you manuscripts?*

A few, but of no real significance. But about one thing I'm sure: that Yiddish literature will never be forgotten. It contains treasures, not so much of art, but treasures of information. History. Ways of life. It does not contain the great Jewish adventure, but it does contain many, many fragments of it. Yiddish books are being written in Brazil, in Argentina, in Israel—a lot of it is worthless, but still, you

of great worth. Maybe in science, which I don't know, but not in literature. Agnon is actually a Yiddish writer who writes in Hebrew; his whole vision is that of a Yiddish, not a Hebrew, writer.

As a matter of fact, I'm going to Israel in June.

*Do you feel at home there?*

No, I feel at home nowhere. But in Israel I have people whom I have known for many, many years. I don't think there's a single person who really feels at home anyplace. "Home" is a good word, but "at home"—this word I don't understand.

*Do you think that there are*



can always find something.

*Israel, which has a Jewish culture, seems to be going in a completely different direction from the Yiddish culture which you represent.*

It's another one of these paradoxes. They revived Hebrew, and went back to the land of their ancestors, which they were driven out of 2,000 years ago. They tried to skip over from the Bible to Ben Gurion and forget two thousand years of exile, which is a big *meshugas*. The political situation is such that any day there can be a new exile. They're living on a volcano. They haven't created in this new Hebrew anything

*certain words or feelings that are particularly communicated in Yiddish?*

In my own Yiddish, I use actually three languages. Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic. I use words from Talmud, *Tanach*, and words which the rabbis used. So, in a way, I bring in certain little treasures from all of these languages. And because of this it's difficult to translate my work. If you take, let's say, the language of a politician, his use of Yiddish can easily be translated into any other language. But if you have allusions to various other Jewish sources, it's much more difficult. However, I do work on the translations myself, and



participate in the editing, because I have learned English, not enough, but the English which I need for my own writing. However, if a writer writes for translation, he has to be not 100 percent good, but 150 percent, to make up for what will be lost in translation. Now you have to change your tape.

*No, ten more minutes.*

Ten more minutes? Oh!

*Do you ever go to movies?*

Almost never. When I first came to this country, and I had girlfriends, they forced me to go to the movies. I was sitting there and watching gangsters shoot one another. I saw that there is no art in it, no art, no information. It was all fabrications. Most probably, there must be some good movies, but I haven't seen many. I remember one, Henry the Eighth, which was a very good movie, with this fat actor from England, I've forgotten his name.

*Charles Laughton?*

Yes. Neither do I go to the theater. I saw *Yentl*, of course.

*Shall we talk about Yentl?*

Ach, I will tell you, it was entertainment, but I haven't written it. It's taken from my story, and I had a collaborator . . . it was so far good that it did not

bore me, but I heard that many people who went said it was not good.

*It was interesting to watch the audience. Often they were so embarrassed they were watching the floor.*

Well, I have seen plays that were so boring that I couldn't understand how the audience stayed there. The theater is in a bad way. Literature is in a bad way; it's become an industry. It was never in a good way; actually, every good word that ever appeared was a miracle. In the history of literature all the non-miracles are more or less forgotten. Can you change the tape before it runs out?

*That's a good idea. . . . You once said that life is impossible without sex.*

Absolutely! Well, it's possible, if you don't have it, you don't have it. Sex is one of our strongest instincts. But I'm not discovering America by saying this.

*Do you think that the sexual freedom we have here*



*is leading to trouble, or is one of the great wonders?*

It can cause a lot of trouble, but it's still good. But censorship is a misfortune. No one should tell a writer—just like there shouldn't be a censor who

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## In the past, in a small Jewish community, first came the rabbi, then came the kosher butcher.

Earning their living as junkmen scouring the hills for rags which the paper mills constantly needed, these Orthodox Jews built up an animated if not necessarily prosperous settlement of several hundred families. It was largely self-contained. "I didn't know," recalls a woman who grew up around Dewey Street, "that there were such things as Reform Jews until I was 12 years old." One of the centers of life was the shul where services were held every day. If added men were needed for a minyan, a school boy would be pulled in from the street. Another social center was the kosher butcher shop, a kind of natural meeting house for the crossroads of daily life.

The women would come to buy their meat several times a week and use it as an occasion to take a break from their cooking and baking and cleaning. The men of the neighborhood would often gather there late at night to play pinochle as Harry's mother rolled stuffed cabbage. On Sundays, when accounts were settled, the store would be crowded. Even the local cop on the beat, ignoring the fact that the shop was doing business on the Christian Sabbath, would come in the back door for an hour's sociability. It was like a club, a place one of Horelly's oldest customers remembers as being "full of fun."

Unlike his two brothers, Harry never thought of taking up another trade. He liked being at the center of the community's information network. He recalls that when new Jewish people came to Pittsfield one of the first to be sought out was the butcher. "My father made it his business to find out everybody else's business. He knew who was rich and who was poor and needed shoes." When a Jewish cardiac specialist began his practice in Pittsfield and was concerned whether the town could support him, Harry's father told him not to worry. "I'll send you patients," Morris Horelly told him. "If I say

they can't pay, don't charge them much. But if I say they're good for it, then get all you can."

At 37, Harry married a woman from Springfield. Mary often felt lonely and isolated from the other women in the neighborhood, thinking they looked down on her because of her husband's profession. If some woman were bragging about her husband's work Mary would proudly announce that her Harry was a "M.D. . . . meat dealer." The Orthodox congregation Harry belonged to made her uncomfortable and she thought she would feel more at home at the Reform temple. "But how could I, a kosher butcher's wife, join a Reform temple?" Being the kosher butcher's wife put her in a special class, making her highly conspicuous. "On hot Saturday afternoons in the summer when everybody else was driving their children to the lakes it would break my heart to see my three children hanging their heads with nothing to do. But I had to keep the Sabbath or it might endanger Harry's business."

Harry admits that he was often watched over by others but he thinks it was due to jealousy. "In a small Jewish community (even today there are only 2600 Jewish families in Pittsfield) like this," he says, "first came the rabbi, then came the kosher butcher." He remembers how he would walk down the street on Saturday morning after services with the rabbi and everybody would take notice of them together talking. "If there were Jewish businessmen with their stores open, they'd hide when we passed. They'd be ashamed."

Gradually, after World War II, the Jewish ghetto started breaking up and Horelly's business started going downhill. "Let's face it," says Bertha Skole, seated in the well-furnished living room of her gracious suburban home, "the old neighborhood wasn't the land of milk-and-honey." Mrs. Skole, who grew up living in the Orthodox synagogue where her father

worked as shammes for \$15 a month ("a fate I wouldn't wish upon a dog"), hardly misses the Dewey Street community. "The farther you go back in history, the worse it gets." As the peddlers became merchants and their children professionals, they moved into larger houses in a better part of town. Though they tended to gather in the same section ("Little Tel Aviv," Mary calls the area where she and Harry also live), it lacked the closeness and sense of intimacy the old neighborhood had. As they moved out their religion became more lax.

The slaughtering house in Pittsfield where Harry was getting his beef closed down twenty years ago and he became totally dependent on wholesalers. For a long time he dealt with a New York firm that gave him good service at a good price until they were caught selling horsemeat and passing it off as kosher. His costs kept mounting as more and more middlemen got involved. At the same time it became easier for customers to drive to Albany or Springfield or even Hartford where they found a greater selection at a lower price than Horelly could offer. These cities were part of the national chain, distribution points for major slaughterers like Linden. "Take a big city like Albany," says Horelly, "I don't think there's even a shochet there. The big change since I've been around is packaging and freezers. A small butcher just can't compete anymore."

So Harry Horelly sits in his deserted shop, living more off of his investments than the revenues of his business. He probably doesn't need the money he makes as a butcher, but the work keeps him busy and in touch with the handful of long-time customers who still remain. "I went to a bar mitzvah at the Reform temple," he said lamentingly to another old timer, "and I didn't recognize half the people." When he closes his doors for the last time it's unlikely he'll be replaced by another kosher butcher. ★



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would tell a man—speak only clever things, don't speak nonsense. If a man wants to be a fool, he will be a fool. If a man wants to use bad language, the government cannot tell him not to do it. The real writers, actually, don't use bad language. They write sexy novels, but they wouldn't use bad language. Those who use bad language do it because they have no feeling for sex. So they try to be sexy with words. But we must have literary freedom. A writer has to be free. A literature that all the time praises its people cannot exist. The Old Testament does not flatter us; it says the worst things about the Jews. I know one man who, reading the Bible for the first time, said, "I thought I was reading *Mein Kampf*." The Bible calls us thieves, murderers, lechers, on every page almost. And yet the ancient Jews made this the holy book. The modern Jew wants to be flattered. Tell him that he's good, he's wonderful, he's honest; and some Jewish writers believe that we should always show how great we are. We are great. But just because we are great, we should not all the time boast. A great person does not boast all the time.

*But sometimes other people boast for a person. Rebecca West and the late Edmund Wilson nominated you for a Nobel Prize.*

I never take these things seriously for a moment. No writer writes for prizes. The great writers don't always get prizes. Tolstoy was nominated for the Nobel Prize, another man got it, nobody knows who he is. Proust, Joyce, didn't get prizes. When a writer sits around and waits for a prize, it's a very miserable situation. Although I got a

few prizes.

*You've said that all your fiction is in some way autobiographical.*

This is true about everybody. Even when you write about other people, you're writing about things that you have seen or imagined.

*There seem to be a number of stories, about middle-aged Yiddish writers, that seem to invite an autobiographical interpretation. They seem like you but they're not exactly you.*

Well, there's no reason why I should not combine my own experience with other things. The main thing is that there is a story, and that the writer says what he wants to say. His means and his methods can vary according to how he wants to do it. He can just as well avoid the first person. Until now, in all my novels, I never wrote in the first person. But I may do so in the future; I think it will work.

*But you have done this in your Yiddish writing.*

Well, I was speaking about English. My readers in Yiddish, in the *Forwards*, are at least five years in advance of my English readers.

*You write most of your fiction in serial form in newspapers.*

Yes, and it has both advantages and drawbacks. It's a good discipline, and you have a better sense of your audience. Dostoevski, Balzac, Dickens—they all worked this way. It would be a good idea if newspapers would once again publish fiction. It would do literature a lot of good. Also, when you write this way, you remember that there must be some ten-

sion in your work. The reader should be eager to read the next installment. One of the problems of modern literature is that the writer is so busy expressing himself that he forgets that there is a reader, that he also has to get something out of this business.

It's all right to express yourself, but if a man comes to you and speaks about himself for five hours, you will say, "All right, it's very fine, but why should I listen to you? I also have a self—I'm interested in me." The older writers understood this. They wrote for the reader. Some of the writers today feel that the reader does not exist. And the truth is, for these people, that the reader doesn't exist, because you cannot read them!

*Are you in contact with other Yiddish writers?*

Sutzkever and I were both published in Israel recently, in Yiddish. There was a time when Yiddish was *treif* for them. This is itself a miracle. If Ben Yehudah would come out of his grave and see this, he would tear locks out of his bald head.

*Do you have any hope for Yiddish in Israel?*

More than in any other place. In spite of everything. Their enmity will disappear after a short time. The new generation is not afraid that Yiddish will take the place of Hebrew. So they are becoming more lenient from day to day. They gave me a doctor title, last year, in Jerusalem, and so on.

*If my students ask me if Isaac B. Singer explained why they should be sitting in my class learning Yiddish, how should I answer them?*

Answer them that a person must have roots. In the dictionary you can find "a man," just a human being, but actually, nobody is just a human being. If we are Jews, we have to have our roots; if not, we lose ourselves completely. Take an assimilated Jew. He's still a Jew. His grandparents did not come on the Mayflower. He begins to be a kind of a bastard, if he denies his ancestry. No past, no history—he becomes something from a dictionary, not from life. You need a home to be part of society. If you are a man of the Bowery, you will get very few invitations.

*Should any living Yiddish writers be translated?*

Some write twenty pages about the hairs on a rabbi's beard. They're boring. A real writer must know how much a reader can take. When he doesn't have a real story to tell, he keeps on describing without end.

I would like in this interview not to mention any names.

*What about writers who are no longer living?*

The dead? The dead you can malign as much as you want. But then they have children. . . .

Yiddish literature, like all literature—as a rule, it's no good, but it has exceptions. Mostly garbage, but a few treasures. Of course, from a higher point of view, the garbage is also treasure. It contains atoms, and molecules, and what not.

*Thank you.*

It was my pleasure. I sometimes think I give too many interviews, but just the same, I say things that I didn't say before.

(May 10, 1976)

