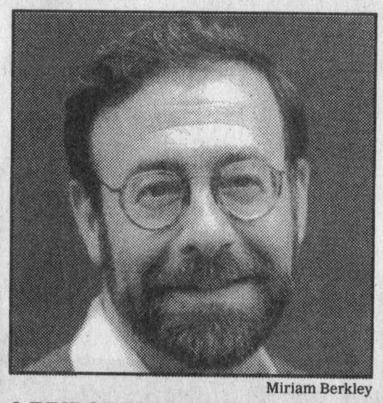
BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Tevye and Other Comforts in a Crumbling World

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

In the 1880's, Sholom Aleichem, the beloved storyteller of the doomed kingdom of Eastern European Yiddish life, edited and published "The Jewish People's Library," a handsome literary almanac that included stories by the best Yiddish writers of the time. In David G. Roskies's view, the almanac was a landmark in Jewish culture, but not for the reason it might seem most natural to assume.

To most of us, probably, the stories of Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, Isaac Meir Dik and, more recently, Isaac Bashevis Singer, sing of the very essence of the Eastern European Jewish tradition. They incarnate, it would seem, authenticity itself, an eccentric, spiritually rich and materially threadbare way of life that has since, of course, disappeared. But Mr. Roskies, who teaches literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, lays out a more complex and interesting theory in "A Bridge of Longing," an ambitious, learned, sometimes difficult study of two centuries of Yiddish literature.



Miriam Berkley

A BRIDGE OF LONGING
The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling

By David G. Roskies

419 pages. Harvard University Press. $37.50.

In his view, the mere fact that the world described by the Yiddish writers is widely taken to be authentic is proof of how successful those writers were in what he calls "creative betrayal," an effort by a group of "modern Jewish revolutionaries, rebels and immigrants" to "salvage for a nontraditional audience forms of the culture assumed to be traditional."

"The Jewish People's Library," for example, was a landmark not so much of an authentic tradition as of an invented one. The rabbis, those avatars of high culture, stuck to Torah and Talmud and saw stories about the folk as devices for simple people and women. But the rabbinical tradition, challenged by migration and the 19th-century movement known as Haskala, or enlightenment, was in crisis. And so the Yiddish writers mixed old and new in a new cultural creation aimed at a revival of faith and identity.

The paradox is that the invented culture was so convincing that for succeeding generations it passed for the real thing. "Wherever there are people who look to Yiddish as an authentic expression of yidishkayt," or East European Jewish culture, "it is to these artifacts that they first turn," Mr. Roskies writes.

He lays out his theoretical position at the beginning of an extended exploration of the lives and work of major Yiddish writers of Poland, Russia and the United States who fixed in the minds of later generations the image of the shtetl, the rural Jewish ghetto, as an abode of tragicomic quaintness, homespun philosophy and redemptive religious faith. He begins with Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, the Hasidic preacher who turned to storytelling "when all else failed."

"It was to rouse those remaining followers from their spiritual slumber, to reconsecrate them to the arduous task of redemption in a world alive with evil and tragedy, that Nahman began telling stories," Mr. Roskies writes. "By bridging Hebrew and Yiddish, the scholars and the folk, mythic past and historic present, Reb Nahman invented a new form of Jewish self-expression."

"A Bridge of Longing" ends with portraits of writers from the scattered world of Yiddish literature — in America, Australia and Israel — after World War II and the Holocaust. In between are intellectually luxuriant essays on what might be called the canonical Yiddish writers, from Peretz to Singer.

There are winding, thickly forested passages in Mr. Roskies's book in which the ordinary reader might lose track of the theme. Here and there are bits of gluey jargon from the world of academic literary criticism: phrases about the mediation of binary oppositions, symbolic landscapes, multidetermined mythic figures and mimetic realism. One wishes that Mr. Roskies were, in the spirit of his subject, more plainspoken. Still, he has produced an often brilliant scholarly volume that will help rescue the "lost art of Yiddish storytelling" by explaining what it really was.

The tradition was, as Mr. Roskies explains, often saved by those who already appeared furthest from it. Mr. Peretz, for example, was a struggling urban lawyer, arrested in 1899 for supporting a workers' strike, who turned to Yiddish folklore rather than the orthodox rabbinic teachings to forge a new secular Jewish identity. He turned the dying shtetl of the end of the 19th century into "an ideal setting for fantasy and heroism,"

Using Yiddish folk tales to preserve what didn't exactly exist.

and in so doing, Mr. Roskies writes, transformed himself into "the master architect of Jewish modernism."

If it was remarkable that a secular lawyer could reinvent the shtetl, then, as Mr. Roskies puts it, it was "nothing short of miraculous" that Aleichem, the best loved of the Yiddish folklorists, was a stockbroker from the mostly non-Jewish city of Kiev. Sholom Aleichem was the pen name of Solomon Rabinovitch, a well-heeled, cosmopolitan disciple of Gogol, whose most celebrated character, Tevye the Milkman (world-famous as the truculent but affectionate father in the Broadway musical "Fiddler on the Roof"), embodied the Yiddish cultural revolution.

"The mature artist found in Tevye, in the Bible-quoting dairyman, a way to explore life's ironies," Mr. Roskies writes. "And the main irony is this: In a closed and crumbling world with scant intellectual resources, offering the most paltry economic and social rewards, a philosophical giant can exist, and persist."

Tevye, in this sense, becomes a kind of Jewish everyman, but also the perfect emblem of Mr. Roskies's theme of the invented tradition that came to seem more authentic than the tradition it subverted. With his rough-hewn eloquence and relentless, common-sense logic, Tevye represents fortitude and faith in the face of a world of "undeserved catastrophe." Mr. Roskies calls him "the figure of a comic Job." As such, he writes, Tevye "embodies the 'folk' without access to power, politics or the press, but with the ability to protest its innocence and to demand redress."