

# ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER TALKS ...ABOUT EVERYTHING

THE FIRST OF A TWO-PART SERIES

**W**hen 74-year-old Isaac Bashevis Singer won the 1978 Nobel Prize in Literature, I visited him in his old-world apartment on New York's Upper West Side. After receiving constant attention from the world's media, Mr. Singer was exhausted but quietly exuberant. His vivacious wife, Alma, felt that he should rest. But he preferred to talk.

He had received congratulatory telegrams, he said, his blue eyes alight, from Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Philip Roth. "And you got a beautiful one from Bernard Malamud," Alma added. "President Carter also telephoned. It was good that I happened to be home on Yom Kippur afternoon," Isaac Singer said.

Skeptical, subdued and self-effacing as usual, he voiced one regret: In the flurry of Nobel excitement, his old friends might think he was neglecting them, "... and that hurts me very much." He was eager to emphasize that awards do not transform either art or the artist. "I will still live at the same address. I will still have the same telephone number. Do you think that winning a prize can change a man's character?"

God forbid!, as one of his fictional characters might say. Like them, Isaac Singer could scarcely be improved upon. Whatever he writes reflects his own humanity and that ineffable inner light which, in our poverty of language, we call spirit. Critics often portray him as a writer of dark visions, yet his deepest vein is richly comic.

We met, through a mutual friend, in September 1976. Once Mr. Singer agreed to let me record his thoughts about literature and its sources, a kind of routine established itself. Over the course of more than two years, I arrived regularly at his home with my tape recorder (a machine which he had never used and which seemed to fascinate him). Mr. Singer would answer the door himself, sometimes comfortably without shoes on. He wore, always, a dark blue suit — his posture stooped, his skin pale, his eyes by turn whimsical and searching.

"Hello, my friend," Mr. Singer would say in that gentle, resonant tone I grew to anticipate. His voice, with the warm European-Jewish inflections he has never lost, is animated and hypnotic.



Isaac Bashevis Singer, at 22, at about the time he began to write.

All our 50 or so taped interviews but one took place in his living room, soft with gray and blue colors, quiet with thick carpets, and crowded with paintings and photographs by friends like Raphael Soyer and Irving Penn. He would sit leaning forward beside his writing desk, manuscripts strewn about his typewriter, whose keys are in Yiddish, the language in which he composes. I quickly learned that Isaac Singer's conversation — so blunt and pungent — was itself a kind of literature.

Our final interview took place one evening in September in the Singers' Surfside, Fla., condominium apartment. Mr. Singer is a vegetarian —

"Not for my health," as he puts it, "but for the health of the chickens." After dinner, he fell into pensive silence and stared down at the ocean, wrinkled and dark. Never before have I been so deeply aware of being in the presence of a mind consigned to ponder life's mysteries. "What can I do to cheer you up?" I asked. Isaac Bashevis Singer shook his head. "I don't need to be cheered up. I am cheerful enough for a man of my age and my troubles," he said.

The following conversations, which begin on Page 26, were excerpted from scores of pages of conversations.

—RICHARD BURGIN

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'The best contact with humanity is through love and sex. Here, really, you learn all about life, because in sex and in love human character is revealed more than anywhere else.'



Sketches of Isaac Bashevis Singer from Raphael Soyer's notebook.

## SINGER TALKS...

**Burgin:** What were your impressions of America when you arrived in 1935?

**Singer:** When I came here I had a feeling of catastrophe. I ran away from one catastrophe in Poland and I found another one when I came here. I had been working in Warsaw as a Yiddish journalist, but the situation of the Jews in Poland became worse from day to day. Hitler was already in power in 1935. Nazis used to come to Poland to visit, to go hunting and to talk to some of the Polish political leaders. My only hope was to come to America. I foresaw that there would be no rest in Poland. Many were too optimistic — or blind enough so that they did not see anything.

**B:** What was the catastrophe that you found here?

**S:** I saw immediately that Yiddish was in a very bad condition. My first impression was that Yiddish was not going to last in America more than another five or six years. In 1935, it was the only language I spoke well, although I knew Hebrew and also some Polish and German. I felt that I had been torn out of my roots and that I would never grow any roots in this country. Almost all the young people around me, whomever I met, were Communists. They spoke about Comrade Stalin as if he were not only the Messiah, but the Almighty Himself, and I knew that it was all a big lie. Also I could not make a living here. The Jewish Daily Forward published some of the stories I brought with me, but my desire for writing had evaporated. So I was in a very bad state. In Warsaw I had women. Here I had difficulties in making acquaintances. The girls all spoke English and those who spoke Yiddish were too old and not exactly to my taste. Sex and Yiddishism don't always go hand in hand, you know. So I was in a kind of despair.

**B:** Had you yet written any books?

**S:** The only thing I had published in Yiddish in Poland was "Satan in Goray." I began life here in furnished rooms and I ate in cafeterias. After a while, I found a better room and I found a girlfriend, although she was older than I. But she was a most charming woman, a wonderful person. Then I found another.

Actually, I had the feeling then that my lot was to be one of those writers who write one book and become silent forever. There are such writers. But I said to myself that even if a writer writes one book which makes sense, he's still a writer. And I made peace with that thought.

The question was: How will I make a living? I certainly could not make a living from this single book which was published in Yiddish in Warsaw. But in 1943, they published "Satan in Goray" again here in Yiddish, with a few new stories. My honorarium for it was \$90. So this is how the situation was.

**B:** Were you married by then?

**S:** I met Alma in 1937 and between meeting and marrying her two or three years went by. I couldn't make a living



Singer and his wife, Alma, dine in Switzerland during a vacation two years ago.

for myself, so how could I make a living for a wife? Also being a German (Jewish, of course), Alma didn't know Yiddish. I told her that I am a writer, but I could not prove it. Nothing was yet translated. She had to believe me. Actually I considered myself a has-been writer, an ex-writer, a writer who had lost the appetite for writing and also the power.

**B:** Was that very painful for you?

**S:** Well, I will tell you. Since I'm a pessimist, it's very easy for me to resign myself. I said, "In what way am I better than all the Jews in Poland? They are in the concentration camps." It's easy for me to resign myself. For me, my personal life is always, "If it goes, it goes." If it doesn't go, it's too bad. I don't cry on anybody's shoulder. I wouldn't even cry on my own shoulder.

### Learning the Language

**B:** How much English did you know when you came here?

**S:** Nothing. I knew three words: "Take a chair." But there was only one camping chair in my furnished room and no one visited me there.

**B:** How did you learn the language?

**S:** I got a teacher. I got a nice girl who taught me English and I also learned some myself. I bought cards and I wrote down on each card a word as if I would be an author of a dictionary, and every night before I went to sleep I repeated them. And I tried to read the Bible in English.

I would say that after a year I was able to make myself understood. I could already buy food in the cafeteria. I could even babble a little English with my teacher. I knew that if I don't learn this language I am lost forever. Immigrants seldom learn English thoroughly — except such men like Nabokov who become professors. Of course, I never intended to write in English. This was the situation.

### Going Forward

**B:** How long was it before you began to compose fiction again?

**S:** Between 1935 when I came here and 1945, I accomplished nothing. Then I suddenly began to write "The Family

Moskat" for The Forward. I was already 40, 41. I was already an old forgotten scribbler. When you are 41, if you have published only one little book, you are out of it.

**B:** What kind of circulation does The Forward have today?

**S:** It still has maybe 80,000; maybe less. Everybody read my novel in The Forward because it's a small newspaper, with only about 10 or 12 pages. People who buy it read almost everything in it. So the man who was then the secretary of The Forward, Mr. Dan Feder, went to [Alfred] Knopf on his own initiative and offered him "The Family Moskat." Knopf wasn't interested, since it was not translated. But this secretary said, "It's a book everybody reads in the Yiddish circles." Knopf had a friend, Maurice Samuel, and Maurice Samuel had a friend, Abba Gross, who had translated a number of books. Gross needed a book to translate; he was out of work. Somehow all these people together made Knopf give me a contract and an advance of \$500. My brother, I.J. Singer, had published all his works at Knopf's and I was not a complete stranger to him.

**B:** Did there come a time when you suddenly realized, "My God, I'm writing consistently now, day after day"?

**S:** In The Forward, when you begin a novel, you have to finish it. People were waiting, so every week I had to deliver a chapter.

**B:** Do you still serialize your work in The Forward?

**S:** Whatever I write, I serialize. An artist, like a horse, needs a whip. I'm so accustomed to deliver some stuff every week, that it has become almost my second nature. Now let me tell you, I haven't missed a week in all these years, except that I get four weeks' vacation. But then I work harder than ever in preparing copy for after the vacation.

### Love and Sex

**B:** You once said that you consider yourself a kind of recluse.

**S:** When I first came to America I was kind of a recluse. Really, there are two powers in me: One power dreams about going away somewhere to an island and hiding from this whole abomi-

nation, from this whole cruelty: "Don't ever see another human being. Lock yourself up and live like a misanthrope." And another power tells me to accept people, talk to them. There is a struggle all the time within me. I also know that if I keep away from people, then I have to deal with only one human being and this is me. When you are with yourself, your egotism — instead of getting smaller — is growing. And your bitterness grows and your suspicions grow. You become twice as *meshuga* as before.

**B:** How do you reconcile these two opposing needs?

**S:** A man must have some contact with humanity. I would say that the best contact with humanity is through love and sex. Here, really, you learn all about life, because in sex and in love human character is revealed more than anywhere else. Let's say a man can play a very strong man: a big man, a dictator. But in sex, he may become reduced to a child or to an imp. The sexual organs are the most sensitive organs of the human being. The eye or the ear seldom sabotage you. An eye will not stop seeing if it doesn't like what it sees, but the penis will stop functioning if he doesn't like what he sees. I would say that the sexual organs express the human soul more than any other limb of the body. They are not diplomats. They tell the truth ruthlessly. It's nice to deal with them and their caprices, but they are even more *meshuga* than the brain.

### The Fascination With Authors

**B:** Did you meet many writers in America?

**S:** I will tell you, no. When I was young I used to read books and I never really looked at who was the author. I didn't care. What's the difference? When I was a boy of 12, I read Tolstoy. But I didn't know it was Tolstoy. I was interested in the story, not the author. A real reader, especially a young reader, never cares too much about the author. He wants to read the book and he enjoys it. When people begin to be less interested in art, they become more interested in the artist.

Notice how many books come out about Hemingway. What is there so much to write about Hemingway? People have become more interested in Hemingway than in what Hemingway has written. When literature becomes overly erudite, it means that interest in the art has gone and curiosity about the artist is what's most important. It becomes a kind of idolatry.

**B:** What you say seems true to me. But if, let's say, you had a chance to meet Tolstoy, wouldn't that interest or excite you?

**S:** The truth is if Tolstoy would live across the street, I wouldn't go to see him. I would rather read what he writes.

**B:** Would you have been curious to meet Shakespeare?

**S:** Not at all. Not for a moment. You see, I don't care if his work was written by Bacon or by (Continued on Page 32)

# SINGER TALKS...

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some ghost writer. Let the professors worry. I am still a reader. When you are really hungry, you don't try to find out the biography of the baker.

## What is a Jew

**B:** In "The Family Moskat" you said, "The Jews are a people who can't sleep themselves and let nobody else sleep." Can you define what makes one a Jew?

**S:** What I meant is that the Jew is such a restless creature that he must always do something, plan something. He is the kind of a man who, no matter how many times he gets disappointed, he immediately makes up some other illusions. It's a special trait of intellectuals. But since the Jews are almost all intellectuals, our restlessness and eagerness to do things, right or wrong, has become almost a national trait.

Here is a story: Once a Jewish man went to Vilna and he came back and said to his friend, "The Jews of Vilna are remarkable people. I saw a Jew who studies all day long the Talmud. I saw a Jew who all day long was scheming how to get rich. I saw a Jew who's all the time waving the red flag calling for revolution. I saw a Jew who was running after every woman. I saw a Jew who was an ascetic and avoided women." The other man said, "I don't know why you're so astonished. Vilna is a big city, and there are many Jews, all types." "No," said the first man, "it was the same Jew." And in a way there is some truth in this story. The intellectual Jew is so restless that he is almost everything simultaneously.

## Literature as Entertainment

**B:** You have often said that you see literature primarily as a form of entertainment. What gives readers a sense of enjoyment or pleasure from a book?

**S:** When people come together — let's say they come to a little party or something — you always hear them discuss character. They will say this one has a bad character, this one has a good character, this one is a fool, this one is a miser. Gossip makes the conversation. They all analyze character. It seems that the analysis of character is the

highest human entertainment. And literature does it, unlike gossip, without mentioning real names.

The writers who don't discuss character but problems — social problems or any problems — take away from literature its very essence. They stop being entertaining. We, for some reason, always love to discuss and discover character. This is because each character is different, and human character is the greatest of puzzles. No matter how much I know a human being, I don't know him enough. Discussing character constitutes a supreme form of entertainment.

## Understanding Women

**B:** Your work exhibits a special understanding of women. Is that a quality you find lacking in many American male novelists?

**S:** I would say that if a man understands men, he understands also women and vice versa. I would not say there is a man who has a great understanding of man and no understanding of women. I don't believe in this. Either we understand everybody or nobody. Most people understand almost nobody, except themselves, their business and their little clan.

**B:** I think your compassion for the lot of women is extremely impressive.

**S:** Some women accuse me that I hate women, you know. The liberated woman suspects everybody. Like a Jew who calls every gentile an anti-Semite, the liberated woman suspects almost every man of being an antifeminist. They would like writers to write that every woman is a saint and a sage and every man is a beast and an exploiter. But the moment a thing becomes an "ism," it is already false and often ridiculous.

## Writer as Extrovert

**B:** What are your feelings about the relationship of the writer to his work?

**S:** I believe our discoveries in literature should not be so much in style, as in finding new phases and new facets of human life. The writer who all the time investigates himself

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and his style makes no discoveries. It is the writer who writes about other people who really achieves good results in literature. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and Balzac and Dickens and Gogol didn't write about themselves. They seldom wrote in the first person.

Although in life I am an introvert, I feel that in my writing I'm kind of an extrovert. I make myself go out and see people, instead of brooding all the time about myself and my literary calligraphy. A writer must be able to forget about himself, at least for some of the time. Tolstoy does, but Proust doesn't. He's written 18 volumes about his family; actually about himself. It's too much.

**B:** *So much of literature is now so introspective, while society is becoming more extroverted, more open, especially in terms of human relations. How do you account for that apparent contradiction?*

**S:** I will tell you. The Freudian theory — this business of analysis and pondering psychology which has developed in our time — has made many people very curious about themselves, their little passions and their caprices. The writers of the 19th century knew that the real gold mine of literature is not in brooding about yourself so much as in observing other people. There's not a single story by Chekhov, for example, where he wrote about himself.

Although I do write from time to time in the first person, I don't consider it a real healthy habit. I'm against the stream of consciousness because it means always babbling about oneself. When you meet a man and he talks only about himself, you're bored stiff. The same thing is true in literature. When the writer becomes the center of his attention, he becomes a nudnik. And a nudnik who believes he's profound is even worse than just a plain nudnik.

**B:** *What about the so-called stream-of-consciousness technique as used by Faulkner and Joyce, in which there is more than one narrator?*

**S:** I don't think that they made really great stories. The bitter truth is that we know what a person thinks not when he tells us what he thinks, but by his actions. This reminds me: Once a boy came over to the cheder where I studied, and he said "Do you know that my father wanted to box my ears?" So the teacher said, "How do you know that he

wanted to box your ears?" And the boy said, "He did it."

A man may sit for hours and talk to you about what he thinks. But what he really is, you can judge best by what he did. This is a real heresy to the psychology and the psychiatry of our time — everything is measured by your thoughts and by your moods.

**B:** *Do you think that one possible reason for the inaction in much of contemporary literature is due to the feeling of impotence; the feeling that we can't "act" anymore in any meaningful sense?*

**S:** Maybe. When you pick up a newspaper, you never find in it what someone was thinking, but always his deeds. This is the reason why people read newspapers more than they read books. The paper tells you that a man has murdered his wife, not that he dreamed about it. In many cases, the reader already knows the psychology behind his deed. If you write that a man came home to his wife, he found her lover in her bed and he shot both of them, the reader understands more or less how angry he was, and what he was thinking when he was arrested. Real literature concentrates on deeds and situations. The stream of consciousness becomes very soon obvious. Tolstoy describes sometimes what his heroes were thinking in their hearts and Dostoyevsky does this in a big way. Nevertheless, their works are full of action.

When you read "Crime and Punishment," you don't know until the very last page why Raskolnikov did what he did. You know how Raskolnikov tried to explain it. His talk is interesting because Raskolnikov doesn't talk to himself in a long stream of consciousness, he talks to the district attorney.

The stream of consciousness is really a way of avoiding a story, of avoiding describing character. Also it's a very easy method. You let a character think for 300 pages. However, when it comes to exceptional talents, all these rules are not valid. A great talent might give you a lot of action within a stream of consciousness. But I don't think it has been done yet in a very wonderful way.

### The Nonpolitical Artist

**B:** *Do you feel that a writer ought to commit himself in political or social affairs?*

**S:** It's unhealthy. I have never seen a single political

novel, or a single novel which has to do with sociology, which really came out well. Sociology deals not with a single person but with masses of people; and in a way this is true of all sciences — even of psychology. Dostoyevsky did not really investigate the problem of crime generally, because there are very few criminals who are like Raskolnikov. Raskolnikov was a unique case and meant to be a unique case. It is true that you can learn a little from the unique about the general, but this is not actually the artist's goal. In literature, what is valid for all, common to all, is of no value. If a painter would paint an apple in the most wonderful way possible, it would have to be a unique apple. He could come from this apple to the idea of gravitation, as Newton did. The greatness of art is not to find what is common but what is unique. And because of this, the moment the writer begins to dabble with masses, with generalizations, he's already out of his profession.

For example, in "War and Peace," we learn very little about Napoleon and his wars. What we learn is about Andrei and Natasha and a few other people. When Pierre, in "War and Peace," begins to make speeches about the agrarian question and how to free the peasants, it becomes such a bore that most of the readers skip it.

## Roots and Assimilation

**B:** *You have acknowledged very strong feelings about Israel's place in history.*

**S:** I would say that it never happened in the world that a people were exiled from their country and afterwards did not assimilate. As a rule, when people are exiled or even if they just emigrate, after a generation or two they become assimilated in their new environment. Millions and millions of Germans emigrated to this country; they all became "real" Americans. There is no trace that they were German except their names. They have forgotten the German language.

But the Jewish people have been in exile for 2,000 years; they have lived in hundreds of countries, spoken hundreds of languages and still they kept their old language, Hebrew. They kept their Aramaic, later their Yiddish; they kept their books; they kept their faith. And after 2,000 years they are going back to Israel. This is such a unique case in human history that if it wouldn't have

happened, no one would believe that it's possible. If someone would have written a fantasy about such people, the critics would call it a silly fantasy. This makes the history of the Jewish people terribly, terribly unique. This power of being a minority, a persecuted minority, and staying with one's culture for 2,000 years, denies all sociological and even psychological theories.

**B:** *Jews who have assimilated as opposed to Jews who have not: This is a recurrent theme in your novels and stories. Do you consider yourself as having at least partially assimilated?*

**S:** No, I don't think I am an assimilated Jew. I still speak Yiddish, the language which my father and mother spoke and my grandfather

**B:** *But you have moved away from certain tenets of Judaism*

**S:** Well, I'm not as religious as my parents were. From the religious point of view, you can say I'm assimilated, but from a cultural point of view, I'm not. I stay with my people. My Jewishness is not for me something of which I'm ashamed, but the very opposite. I'm proud of it and I keep on accentuating all the time I am a Jew. I write about Jews, I write in Jewish languages. I began to write in Hebrew.

**B:** *What is your definition of a Jew who's assimilated?*

**S:** An assimilated Jew is a man who is ashamed of his origin, who denies his roots. He wants to make believe that he's somebody else.

**B:** *May I take myself as an example? I grew up in a town that was preponderantly Jewish, but all the Jews there were assimilated*

**S:** If you were born in an assimilated house, I cannot accuse you. If your father or grandfather was already an assimilationist, there is nothing you can do.

**B:** *What is an assimilationist? My father, for instance, doesn't observe religious practices. He has never denied his Jewishness but neither would he flaunt it.*

**S:** Did he send you to a Jewish school when you were a boy?

**B:** No.

**S:** Did he teach you Hebrew or Yiddish?

**B:** No. But he would not deny that he was Jewish. He was in no way ashamed of being Jew-  
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ish. When we were in Europe, he wouldn't visit certain regions that had discriminated against Jews.

**S:** I would say that he was a partial assimilationist. If he would believe that Jewishness is important, why not teach it to his child? Take for example, my son: My son is now a Hebrew writer; he lives in Israel; he belongs to a kibbutz. I saw to it more or less that my children are Jews, consciously Jews. Not that they should say, "I happen to be a Jew, but it means nothing to me," the way some assimilationists would consider it a burden. These people try to deny their roots. They can be great scholars and whatever else they might be, but they can never be great writers. No assimilationist can be a great writer.

**B:** Why is that so?

**S:** Because literature is completely connected with one's origin, with one's roots. The great masters were all rooted in their people. Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Gogol were as Russian, as Ukrainian, as they could be. Dostoyevsky himself even became a Pan-Slavic. The only real writer who had no roots was Kafka. He was a Jew, but he was kind of an assimilated Jew. At least, I would say about Kafka he was looking for his roots. He tried to get them. But when you take a man like Koestler, who tries so hard to show that the Jews are not even Jews, he fails also as a writer. A Jewish writer who denies his Jewishness is neither a Jew nor does he belong to any other group.

**B:** If you had fallen in love with a non-Jewish woman, could you possibly have married her?

**S:** I don't know, I don't know. Sometimes love is stronger than a man's convictions.

My wife comes from an assimilated house. She was born in Germany, and her father was assimilated. Their Jewishness was for them only for Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. They were not totally assimilated, but partially. When we got acquainted, I told Alma that I'm a Yiddish writer. This looked to her so far away, so strange. "What does it mean, a Yiddish writer? What kind of career can a Yiddish writer make? And what is the sense of writing in a language which is dying and for people who are backward?" But I felt — and I am not boasting, I just say so — that Yiddish and the Jewish people and their language

were for me the most important things. I felt that if I want to be a real writer, I have to write about them and not about the American gentiles. I had to remember my youth and I had to stay with my language and with the people whom I know best. An assimilated writer never does this. He tries always to go into a group where he does not really completely belong.

**B:** I'm the product of what we call a mixed marriage . . . and because I'm also a writer of fiction, your ideas about "roots" make me feel almost doomed.

**S:** I will tell you. In your case, it's certainly not your fault. But you have to find your roots. There is one remedy. Write about the people whom you know best, whether they are Jews or Protestants or Turks. If you write about the things and the people you know best, you discover your roots, even if they are new roots, fresh roots. But they are better than nothing, than no roots.

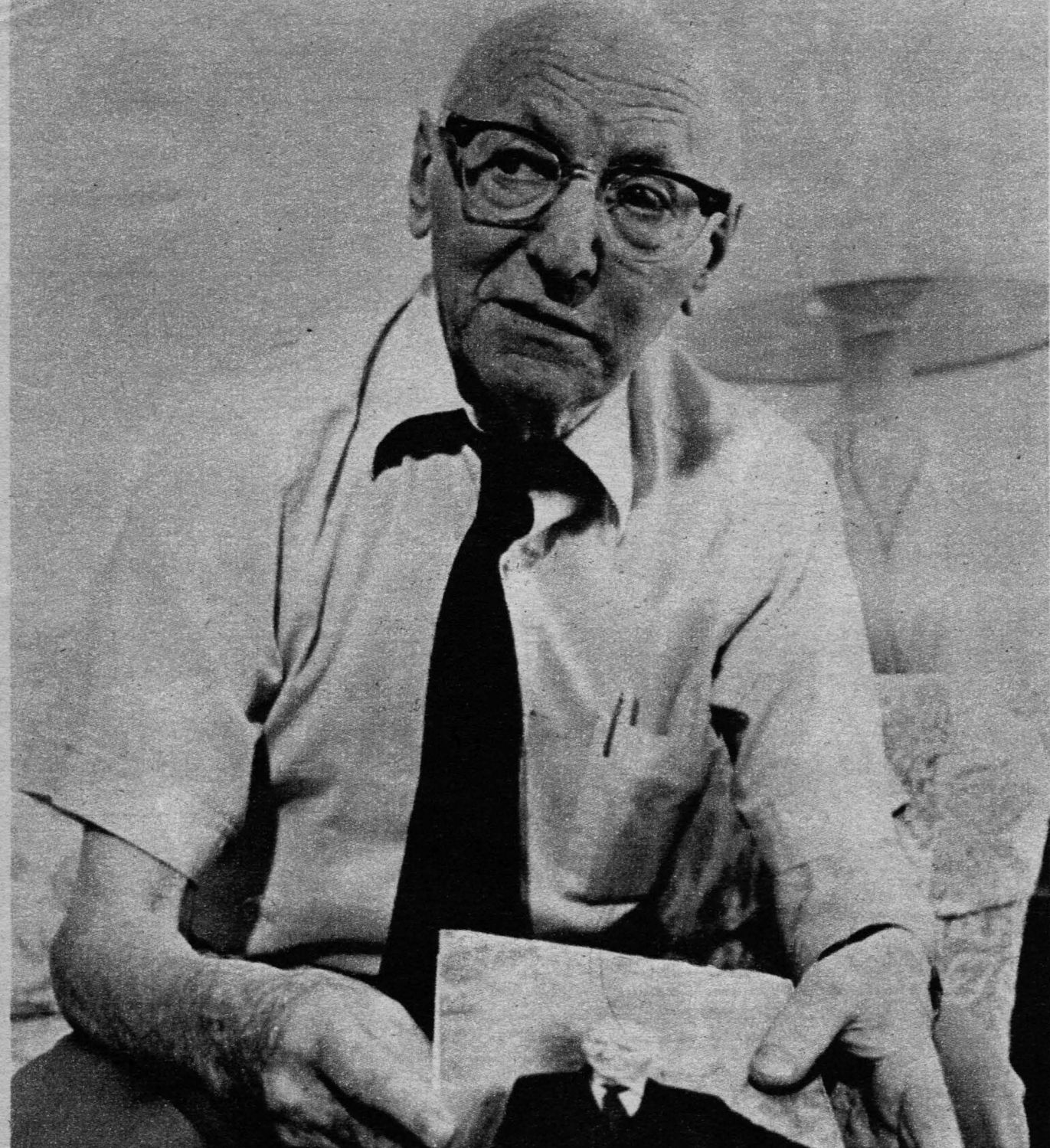
In other words, you should not deny your father's roots or your mother's roots. The idea is to not deny anything. Don't say, "I'm a Jew and my mother's origin doesn't mean a thing to me." And don't say the opposite: "I am a complete Catholic or Protestant and my father's roots don't count." You have to admit that you are such a case and make the best of it. You did not grow up in a vacuum. Your case is also a case of roots. It's crazy roots, mixed roots, but roots they are.

**B:** My father brought me up to be a free thinker with a cosmopolitan and very liberal point of view.

**S:** I don't know. . . . I will tell you. A Marxist has never written a good novel. Because a writer must have roots and Marxism is against roots. Marxism is cosmopolitanism and a cosmopolitan cannot write a good work of fiction — because a writer belongs to his people, to his clan. If you are going to write, let's say, a cosmopolitan novel and write just about a human being, you will never succeed. Because there isn't such a thing as "just a human being."

**B:** Meaning what?

**S:** You cannot write a love story of two human beings without dealing with their background. To whom did this person belong, and what language did his father speak at home, and so on. Of course, we know that you are writing about a man. But the question



A bemused Singer, after learning he had won the Nobel Prize.

is: What man? Where does he come from, where does he live? You have to give his address. Of course, an address in literature is different from an address on an envelope, but the idea is the same. Go from the general to the particular, until you give such signs that make us know there is only one such person. Literature assumes that no two men and no two women are completely alike. Individuality is its axiom.

### The Enduring Form Of the Novel

**B:** The Argentine writer José Luis Borges said that he could envision a world without novels — but not without tales, stories or verses. How do you feel about that?

**S:** I feel that once we have novels, we will never be without them. Once man has created something, he will always come back to it. For me, if I would be sentenced either to 10 years in prison with books or to five years without them, I would rather take the 10 with books.

There may be some periods of history with shorter novels or longer novels. Or there may be novels which will deal with other topics than love, although it's hard for me to imagine this. But there is no reason why the novel should go under, or television should go under, or radio. Everything which man has invented has a chance to stay, one way or another.

**B:** So you don't feel, as Borges seemed to, that the

story and the poem are somehow eternal literary forms and superior to the novel?

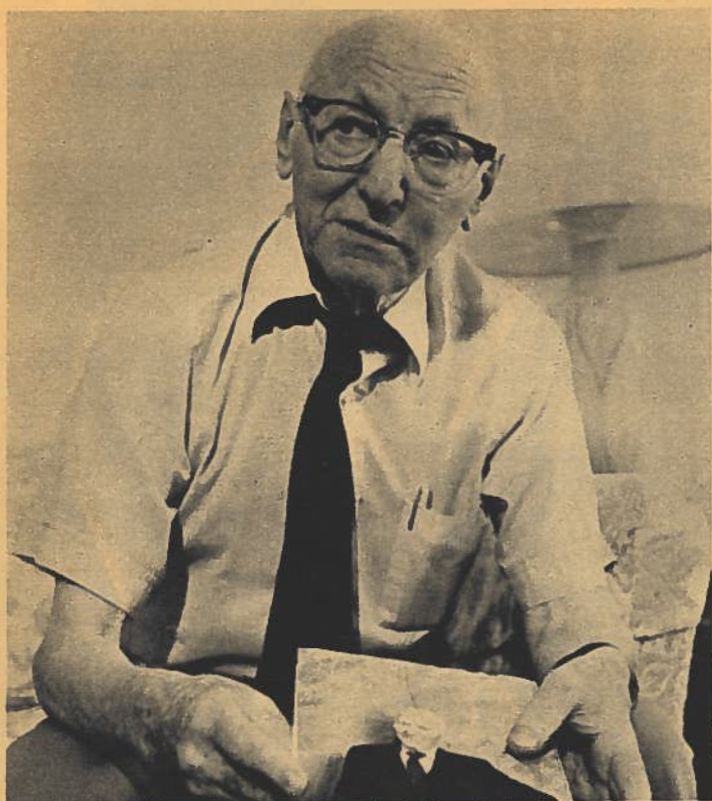
**S:** I believe that the novel is a story. It is only a larger story — a story which is spread out. And because it is large, you can also make stories within the stories. If the novel has no story, it's no novel.

**B:** You once said that you felt you had a greater command of the short story.

**S:** I would say not only I, but everybody does. A short story is a lot easier to plan, and it can be more perfect, more accomplished, than a novel. If you have a short story to tell, you can work on it so that from your point of view you have made it perfect. But a novel, especially a large novel, can never be perfect even in the eyes of the creator — if the creator is a person capable of self-criticism. The chance of having flaws becomes larger proportionately to the length of the novel. In other words, a longer novel usually has more flaws than a short novel — except if the longer novel is written by a master and the shorter one by a bungler. Tolstoy's "The Cossacks" or "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" has less flaws than "War and Peace."

**B:** Do you proceed differently when you are writing a story and when you are writing a novel?

**S:** Even when I am writing a novel, I am looking for the story. But always the beginning is a kind of an atmosphere I want to create. The first thing is not the story but



*A bemused Singer, after learning he had won the Nobel Prize.*

is: What man? Where does he come from, where does he live? You have to give his address. Of course, an address in literature is different from an address on an envelope, but the idea is the same. Go from the general to the particular, until you give such signs that make us know there is only one such person. Literature assumes that no two men and no two women are completely alike. Individuality is its axiom.

### **The Enduring Form Of the Novel**

**B:** *The Argentine writer José Luis Borges said that he could envision a world without novels — but not without tales, stories or verses. How do you feel about that?*

**S:** I feel that once we have novels, we will never be without them. Once man has created something, he will always come back to it. For me, if I would be sentenced either to 10 years in prison with books or to five years without them, I would rather take the 10 with books.

There may be some periods of history with shorter novels or longer novels. Or there may be novels which will deal with other topics than love, although it's hard for me to imagine this. But there is no reason why the novel should go under, or television should go under, or radio. Everything which man has invented has a chance to stay, one way or another.

**B:** *So you don't feel, as Borges seemed to, that the*

*story and the poem are somehow eternal literary forms and superior to the novel?*

**S:** I believe that the novel is a story. It is only a larger story — a story which is spread out. And because it is large, you can also make stories within the stories. If the novel has no story, it's no novel.

**B:** *You once said that you felt you had a greater command of the short story.*

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Bruce Davidson

*Looking no more than usually omniscient, Isaac Bashevis Singer takes a stroll on Manhattan's Upper West Side and brings a gleam of recognition to a passerby's eye.*

this atmosphere. And then you look for a story to fit an atmosphere, an emotion, an idea. Take, for example, Strindberg's "The Father." Strindberg's first idea was that the whole system of fatherhood is a phony thing. No father knows surely that he is the father of his children. All men are cheated, or they are all the time about to be cheated. This was a strong emotion for Strindberg, because he hated this idea. He wanted man to be sure that he is the father of his child. And then, out of this emotion, he created his story. Of course, sometimes the story comes first and the idea later. Sometimes the story itself is the idea. There are no rules to the game.

#### Drawing on Lil

**B:** But what about Isaac Singer? How does the work come to you? I imagine different stories come in different ways.

**S:** For me, it is a desire to record either emotions or a system of emotions, or a locality which I think no one has ever before done. Let's say in "The Family Moskat" I said to myself, "Warsaw has just now been destroyed. No one will ever see the Warsaw I knew. Let me just write about it. Let this Warsaw not disappear forever." Just like Homer (forgive me the comparison), who was the greatest of them all, felt about Troy, I felt about Warsaw. But I said to myself, "I can only write about the Jewish Warsaw, not the Catholic Warsaw." I didn't know the Catholics as well as the Jews.

**B:** Then how does the story come to you?

**S:** This story of "The Family Moskat" didn't come at once. I knew a man like Meshulam Moskat would be interesting to write about, but there must be a story to tell. And then I said to myself, if there must be a story, it has to be a love story because I knew already then that you cannot write a novel without a love story. Many writers have tried and they always failed. It becomes boring. It must be a love story.

I also wanted to have someone who's kind of similar to me, like this Asa Heshel, although he's not really me. And then I knew that Asa Heshel would not alone make the novel interesting. There must be other people. I would say it's the process of creating a world of emotions. Then you must slowly develop the story, because the story and its tension — in connection with

genuine characters — is the most difficult thing in a novel.

**B:** Do dreams ever influence what you write?

**S:** I don't know if they do, but I always dream. It seems that when we sleep, we all become geniuses in a way, because only there do we see things so unusual and the same time so...

**B:** Meaningful?

**S:** Meaningful and so mysterious and with such great emotion.

**B:** Everything is condensed and symbolic...

**S:** And so fantastic. There is an expression in Hebrew, "the creator of dreams." It seems the creator of dreams is the greatest genius of all times. He's everything: a mystic and a symbolist and a profound realist. The only thing is that most people cannot dream when they are awake. They only dream at night and they also forget completely their dreams. They call the artist a dreamer and there is some truth in it. To make art is a way of dreaming. The only difference is that what a dream can do in two minutes, it sometimes takes a writer two years to do.

**B:** You once said to me that you don't really invent characters.

**S:** I always take models from life. Most of the models from "Satan in Goray" come from the town of Bilgoray where my grandfather was a rabbi. Actually, in some cases, I even took the names of the people, like Mordecai Joseph. This man I took, so to say, with his flesh and bones and also with his name. I use living characters. I don't like to boast, but the people whom I describe have life. They are not ideological creatures; not sociological or psychological robots. They are human beings with all their silliness, with all their uniqueness.

**B:** Can you sum up your conditions for writing?

**S:** First I get the idea, the emotion. Then I need a plot: a story with a beginning, a middle and an end; just as Aristotle said it should be. A story to me means a plot where there is some surprise. It should be so that when you read the first page, you don't know what the second will be. When you read the second page you don't know what the third will be. Because this is how life is — full of surprises. There is no reason why literature should-



An old snapshot of Singer's first wife and their son, Israel Zamir

n't have many surprises as well.

The second condition is I must have a passion to write the story. Sometimes I have a very good plot but somehow the passion to write this story is missing. If this is the case, I would not write it.

And the third condition is the most important: I must be convinced, or at least have the illusion, that I am the only one who could write this particular story or this particular novel. This does not mean that I am the best writer. That for this particular topic and environment I am the only one. Let's take for example, "Gimpel the Fool." The way I tell it, is a story which only I could write — not my colleagues or, say, writers who were brought up in English.

Now, for a plot you need characters. So instead of inventing characters, I look at the people I have met in my life who would fit into this story. I take ready-made characters. This does not mean that I just "photograph" them. No. I sometimes combine two characters and make from them one character. I may take a person whom I met in this country and put him in Poland or vice versa. But just the same, I must have a living model.

The fact is that painters, all great painters, painted from models. They knew that nature has more surprises than our imagination can ever invent. When you take a model, a character whom you know, you attach yourself to nature and all its surprises and idiosyncrasies and peculiarities.

I don't invent characters because the Almighty has already invented millions and billions of them. Humanity may become a million years old and I'm sure that in all this

time there were won't be two people really alike. Just like experts at fingerprints do not create fingerprints but learn how to read them, so the writer reads God's characters.

**B:** You said once that sometimes you develop the character to such an extent that the model becomes almost a skeleton.

**S:** Yes, I almost forget the model. At the beginning I look all the time into the model but, after I have developed the model more and more, the picture becomes richer than the model itself and then I can afford to forget the model for a while. But even this isn't really so good. It's better never to let the model go.

You'll see the great painters often have models. They look and they paint. And sometimes you ask yourself, "Why do they have to look at this person a million times? They have already seen his face." But that isn't true. Every time this artist looks up, he sees something else, some new variation. This is very important. I think it's a great tragedy that literature stopped looking at models. Writers are so interested in "isms," in ideologies and in theories, that they think the model cannot add much. But, actually, all the theories and all the ideas become stale in no time, while what nature delivers to us is never stale. Because what nature creates has eternity in it. ■

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M. (pseud. I. BASZENIS)

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Signature du titulaire :

*I. H. Zynger*

# ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER'S UNIVERSE

The master storyteller  
unfolds his own passionate, original vision of  
(natural and supernatural) life.

## THE SECOND OF A TWO-PART SERIES

**N**ext Sunday, in Stockholm, Isaac Bashevis Singer will receive the 1978 Nobel Prize in Literature. Seldom before has he spoken publicly with such candor and intimacy as he does in these sometimes droll, often exalted, conversations with Richard Burgin, a writer. This week, in matchless Singer fashion, the Nobel laureate explores many of his favorite subjects: love and betrayal, Spinoza and Schopenhauer, his experiments in free will and his natural laziness, his admiration for Tolstoy and his private quarrel with the Almighty — “with hints,” as Mr. Singer says, grinning puckishly, “that if the Messiah won't come by Himself, we will have to force Him to come by picketing the gates of Heaven!”

**BURGIN:** You gave the name “Passions” to a recent collection of your stories. Passion is one of the great themes that runs through your work and it seems to have two faces: People are victims of their passions and this makes for a perilous world; but it's equally perilous to be without them.

**SINGER:** Completely so. I always feel that God was very frugal, very stingy in bestowing gifts on us. He didn't give us enough intellect, enough physical strength. But when He came to emotions, to passions, He was very lavish. He gave us so many emotions and such strong ones that every human being, even if he is an idiot, is a millionaire in emotions. Sometimes we ask: Why do we need so many emotions which make us suffer and confuse us? When I observe the animals, I see that their emotions are quite limited. The emotions of horses or of elephants are more or less the equivalent of their behavior. You will never say about an animal that its emotions drove it in one direction while it acted in another direction. An animal acts perfectly ac-

ording to its feelings, while man cannot exist if he gives in to all his feelings. We know that if a person, any person, would try to live according to his passions, he would immediately . . .

**B:** . . . break all the Commandments?

**S:** Let's say not only he would break the Commandments, he would break his neck. When you ride a motorcycle or a car, you have sometimes the desire to drive 200 miles an hour. But you know that if you use too much gasoline, you may be punished or the car may be broken or you may kill somebody. The more man progresses, the more he has to curb his passions. In this respect, he is a complete exception in the creation of life. All other living things which we know don't curb their passions.

The very essence of literature is the war between emotion and intellect, between life and death. When literature becomes too intellectual — when it begins to ignore the passions, the emotions, it becomes sterile, silly, and actually without any substance.

Although I don't agree in every way with Spinoza, I admire one sentence of his where he says that everything can become a passion. It means actually that there is nothing in life which cannot become a passion. The man who collects stamps can become so passionate about them that he would endanger his life to get some silly stamp from some faraway country. The number of passions are almost as great as the number of objects, the number of notions. Of course, there are the main passions like sex and power. But all the other things can also evoke passions, even great passions.

**B:** So you do not believe that a single passion dominates man, such as Nietzsche's will to power or Freud's libido?

**S:** Nietzsche knew very well that if you let your emotions run amok, eventually you destroy yourself. To be able to write “Thus Spake Zarathustra,” he had to control himself. Man cannot live without self-control. Even when a man is letting go, he doesn't really let go.

**B:** Borges once said that a writer has

only three or four stories or passions to impart and that everything he writes is a variation on these few themes.

**S:** I think in a way it is so. A good writer writes about things that stir his passions and each man has only a limited number of them. But if he's a good writer, he can describe countless variations on every one.

When you read, let's say, Tolstoy: In “War and Peace” and “Anna Karenina,” here it is Pierre and there it is Levin and they are all the same type of people. They are also like Tolstoy, more or less, as Tolstoy might have been. Those people who complain that the writer repeats himself are not really just, because if he wouldn't have repeated himself, he wouldn't have been true to his basic desires.

Every writer must write on his own topics, which are connected with his passions, with the things he is pondering about, brooding over. This is in part what gives a writer his charm. And it makes him genuine. It's only the amateur who will take hold of any topic. He will go somewhere, he will hear a story — something, anything — and immediately it will become “his” story. The real writer writes only stories which are connected with his personality, with his character, with his way of seeing the world. So in a way when we read the books of the great writers — when we read, let's say, “The Brothers Karamazov” — we have the typical *déjà vu* feeling. Nevertheless, because Dostoyevsky is a great writer, we want to see him do it again in some different way.

## Errors and Betrayals

**B:** The theme of betrayal also often occurs in your work: men betray women, women betray men, children betray parents, people betray their religions or betray God.

**S:** What bothers me more than anything else is that men betray them-

selves. For example, a man makes a decision to be a good socialist, then he becomes a phony socialist. This is very much connected, of course, with the problem of free will — because if man would really exercise free will, he could make a decision and do as he decides. But in many cases, man will make a decision and do the very opposite.

Even in love, people betray themselves. And when you betray somebody else, you also betray yourself. I would say a great part of human history is a history of self-betrayal and betrayal of others.

## Free Will and Fatalism

**B:** You once wrote, “The universe is full of errors.” Error is another frequent theme in your work.

**S:** Spinoza says that there are no errors in the universe. Errors are only errors from the human point of view. Error is a human conception. We would never say that a storm makes an error because it didn't howl in the right way. We know that a storm or light or water or fire — everything which is, say, connected with dead nature (although we don't know if it is dead or not) — makes no errors. Because we assume that a person has free will, we may say that he made a mistake. The truth is that the belief in free will is a categorical imperative. We cannot live a moment without believing in it. You can say a hundred times it does not exist, just as you can say that gravity does not exist. But while you say that gravity does not exist, you are still walking on the earth, you don't fly up to the sky.

**B:** Schopenhauer believed in blind will motivating nature.

**S:** I would say that Schopenhauer is full of contradictions, but just the same he is wonderful. He was a genius — a beautiful writer, a profound observer of human affairs. He was a great psychologist. As far as psychology is concerned, I believe in him more than in all

the other psychologists. He had a deep knowledge of human life.

However, I don't agree with Schopenhauer that the will is blind. I could agree with him that the thing-in-itself is will; but I don't believe that a blind power could create a flower or a man. What I admire in Schopenhauer is his courage to be a pessimist. Because most of the philosophers all try, one way or another, to paint an orderly universe and to give people hopes which are false and nothing more than wishful thinking. Schopenhauer had the rare courage to say that we are living in a world of evil.

In this respect, he resembles the cabalists. They, too, call this world a den of demons. They say that the world in which we live is the worst of all the worlds; the weakest link in God's chain. Especially man is weak; unless he makes an effort to act rightly. If human beings behave well, the cabalists say, then they keep all of creation in order. Then the chain of creation is whole. If we do the wrong things, we break the chain of creation; or you may even call it the chain of evolution.

According to the cabalists, God has compensated man for creating him in an evil world by giving him free will. But Schopenhauer never went in this direction. Actually he does not believe in free will. Schopenhauer is a fatalist although, like all fatalists, even he is compelled to think in terms of free choice. His belief that intellect can light up blind

will so that it should reverse itself, this is something! This is a casuistic compromise.

**B:** *On one level, your work as a whole seems to constitute an imaginative reconstruction of the history of the Jews, the Polish Yiddish-speaking Jews. Did you intend, like Proust or Faulkner or Balzac, that your fiction would form a kind of grand design?*

**S:** Fiction can be very grand if you stay in your element with your own passions and your own opinions. But if you try to go out and make it a coherent philosophy, it never becomes one. After all, Balzac tells us about French people, not necessarily about all people. He stays within his own society. He doesn't tell us about the Chinese

What we enjoy in literature is not what is common to all people but what is unique to one specific person. The so-called universal writer reveals nothing. He repeats old truths. On the other hand, the more specific the writer is, the greater his individuality, the more we learn from him about all of us.

### Keeping the Commandments

**B:** *Sartre once said that literature will replace religion.*

**S:** I think it's completely false. Literature hasn't really done anything for humanity which could be compared to

religion. People live according to religion; they die for religion.

No novel, no poem, and no short story can take the place of the Ten Commandments. To be a religious person, it's not enough to read the Commandments, you have to practice them. So literature will not do the job. Religion becomes literature when people don't take it seriously anymore. This actually happens in our time.

To ascribe too much importance to literature is very false. The Jews consider the Torah of the highest importance — but only as long as the Torah is practiced. If the man is a scholar of the Torah and he doesn't keep the Commandments, they consider him a heretic and a traitor to his religion. If you read the Bible as just a good book, as poetry or prose or history, then you are not anymore a religious person.

**B:** *You have said to me that morally, ethically and spiritually, man has made little progress through the centuries.*

**S:** I spoke from the point of view of religion. When Moses gave the Torah, he believed it was possible to create a nation of spiritual people, a kingdom of priests, a whole nation which would live according to moral codes. This never became a reality. I would say that the reason why, according to legend, Moses wasn't allowed to cross the Jordan was

*(Continued on Page 44)*

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because what he wanted to create and what followed in the years after the revelation on Mount Sinai were two different things altogether.

We have material progress in Israel today, but this is not really the essence of Judaism. From a religious point of view our greatest achievements were not in Israel actually, but in exile. It's only after the Talmud was composed — between the Talmud and the Emancipation — that the Jews lived, generally speaking, a highly moral life. The Bible tells us that our ancestors were idolaters most of the time. Our kings, with few exceptions, did not do what was right in the eyes of Jehovah.

**B:** How do you reconcile this view of Jewish history with your belief in God?

**S:** I believe in God, but I have my doubts about revelation. I have no proof whatsoever that God reveals Himself or tells us how to behave, what to do, what He wants. I believe God is a silent God. And He must have a very good reason why He is silent. If He would begin to talk, He would have to speak in 3,000 languages and in all kinds of accents. God speaks in deeds. But the language of deeds is so large — its vocabulary is as large as the universe, perhaps — so we only understand a very small part of His language.

Everything man says about God is pure guesswork. But since I believe in God's existence and since God created man and formed his brain, I believe also that there must be something of the divine in men's ideas about Him — even if they are far from being adequate.

**B:** What do you understand of His language?

**S:** I understand it like a child of 3 years — who can use a few words: Papa, Mama, bread — understands when he hears adults discuss higher matters. So in a way, because the language of deeds is so large and our understanding of it is so small, I would say that God has reveals Himself in very, very small doses. We don't know really who He is, what He is, what He wants. But just the same, I feel that He's there. To me, He is a God who only allows us to grasp a few words of His large language. He is a hidden God.

**B:** What in your life has confirmed this belief?

**S:** I will tell you. I cannot be-

**'I'm inclined to believe that God and the world are actually identical. God is everything: a spirit, all matter, what is, what was and what will be, as Spinoza conceived Him.'**

lieve that, as the materialists say, the universe is a result of some explosion which took place billions of years ago. If you don't believe the universe is an accident, you have to believe that there was some plan in its becoming, some design, some intelligence. And if you believe this, you believe already in a God. If you insist on calling it nature, you can call it nature. But to me, nature is not blind. As a rule, when we say nature, we mean blind nature — a nature which does things according to laws, by sheer causality, without plan or purpose. This I don't believe. So if I believe the opposite, I already believe in God. You can call it the Unconscious, the Absolute, the Substance, the Monad of all Monads. It doesn't make any difference. "God" is just as good as any other word.

### The World of God

**B:** Do you envision God in any material form?

**S:** I'm inclined to believe that God and the world are actually identical. God is everything: a spirit, all matter, what is, what was and what will be, as Spinoza conceived Him. However, according to Spinoza, the Substance with its infinite number of attributes has no will, has no purpose. I don't believe in this part of Spinoza. I think that we can just as well ascribe to the Substance, intelligence and will and designs and purposes. The fact that we only know, according to Spinoza, two attributes — extension and thought — does not mean that the other attributes which we may ascribe to God don't exist. We can ascribe to Him many more — even mercy — although we may not see them.

Here is the place where definition and logic end and faith begins. Pantheism isn't geometry. Without faith it dissolves into nothing.

**B:** *In spite of your own belief in God, you portray men and women who are skeptics with such vitality, verisimilitude and compassion.*

**S:** Since there is no evidence attesting to what God is, I doubt all the time. Doubt is part of all religion. All the religious thinkers were doubters. Even the Bible, although it is full of faith, it is also full of skepticism. The Book of Job, you can call a book of skepticism.

In the Book of Psalms, man says to God, "Why do you sleep, God? Why don't you wake up and see what's happening?" Great lovers are sometimes full of suspicion and even hostility. You love a person and the person assures you he or she loves you; at the same time, there is doubt. The girl who loves you will ask you 10 times a day, "Do you love me, do you really love me?" You have to all the time say, "Yes, yes, yes!" The same thing is true in religion.

**B:** *You once said to me, "Well, if the world is a jungle, that's the way God wants it." We were talking about men like Stalin and Hitler; little men who had too much power. I said, "How can God allow this?" You said, "Maybe God is a little God."*

**S:** I am not a man who is really preaching religion. My religion is for myself. I have moments when I almost deny God, but I also have moments of exultation. When I'm in trouble, I pray. In spite of the fact that I pray to God, I also pray against God. Religion is not a simple thing, and neither is love. You can love a woman and you can betray her. You can love her, quarrel with her, and hate her. Everything in us is human. In my belief in God, there's only one thing which is steady: I never say the universe was an accident. The word "accident" should be erased from the dictionary. It has little meaning in everyday life and no meaning in philosophy.

**B:** *You mentioned that although you have mixed feelings about Nabokov, you were relieved to find out that he be-*

*What do you mean by that term?*

**S:** Let me tell you. I don't really believe that there are two things: the natural and the supernatural. I will not say that gravity is natural and telepathy is supernatural. If telepathy exists, it has as much right to call itself a part of nature as gravitation. We call supernatural the things which we don't know, for which we have no evidence. For example, there is no real evidence that there is a soul or free will. The same applies to ghosts or spirits or other entities whose existence we cannot prove (because we cannot take them into a laboratory and show evidence that they really exist). So we call them supernatural.

When it comes to such things as electricity and magnetism — although we also don't know

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**'We still don't know what magnetism is and why a magnet will attract a nail or a pin and not cottage cheese. The atom is more of a riddle today than it was 3,000 years ago.'**

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what they are — we at least can show how they function. But, actually, if these other things which we call supernatural really exist, they too are part of nature — although, for the time being, unprovable. Or perhaps they are unprovable by their very essence as is, for example, the existence of absolute ethics and other such higher matters. But in my view, ghosts, spirits, premonitions, telepathy, clairvoyance are actually part of nature. Can we prove that there is such a thing as love? There are a number of people who will tell you that love is nothing but a word and doesn't exist; there is only carnal desire. As a matter of fact, some extreme behaviorists don't believe that there is such a thing as inborn character or personality. They say everything is behavior, everything in man is conditioned, except for a few instincts like the fear of loud noise or falling. There are



many things we have to believe in — such as love, such as the human spirit — because without believing, we are completely lost.

**B:** Conrad said the real world is so fantastic that, in a sense, there is no difference between the so-called "supernatural" world and the "real" one.

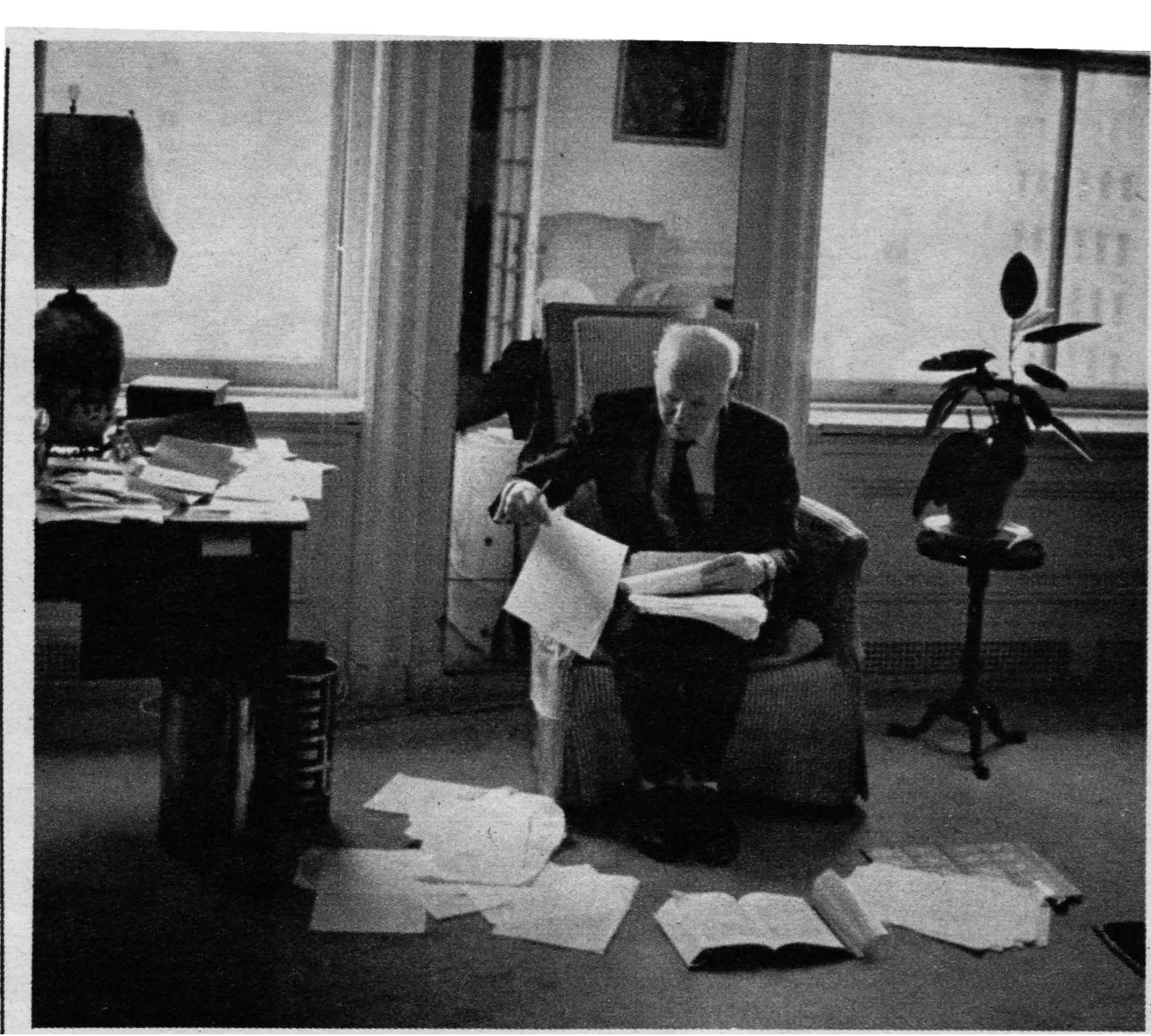
**S:** Yes, we still don't know what magnetism is and why a magnet will attract a nail or a pin and not cottage cheese. The atom is more of a riddle today than it was 3,000 years ago. We don't know what light is. We don't know what life is. We speak about electrons and we know how they work, more or less, but not what they are and how they came to be. Actually, our knowledge is a little island in a great ocean of non-knowledge. The supernatural is like the ocean, while the so-called natural is only a little island on it. And even this little island is a great riddle.

**B:** When you affirm the so-called supernatural, are you saying, "I'm trying in my writing to call attention to how little we really know"?

**S:** Exactly. You have expressed exactly my way of thinking. I try to call attention to the things which we cannot prove, but in whose existence I believe, nevertheless.

**B:** Socrates said, "I know nothing, except the fact of my own ignorance."

**S:** When it comes to these matters, no one can be really original. Originality is not the only great quality of a writer. Sometimes we have to repeat emotions and ideas because we cannot live without them. If a man is in love with a woman and says, "I love you," he knows very well that millions of people have said it before. But this word, "love," is, for the time being, adequate; it expresses more or less what he feels. So he will use it. Originality is not seen in single words or even sentences. Originality is the sum total of a man's thinking or his writing. There are writers who try to make every sentence original. They are afraid to say something which has been already said by somebody else. They don't allow themselves to write a single sentence unless it has some queerness, and the net result is banality. In the end, you say to yourself: There is nothing original in



Ensnared in an easy chair beside his living-room work table, Singer edits a long manuscript.

this man except the frustrated ambition to be original.

**B:** Can you think of such writers?

**S:** I can think of such writers but I'm not going to mention names.

### Science vs. Literature

**B:** In our conversations, we have often been discussing philosophic ideas. Do you believe that philosophy is more aligned with science than with literature?

**S:** Philosophy is a kind of learning in which you have really to believe. There are no proofs, as in science. You cannot say that Spinoza has proven that there is a Substance with an infinite number of attributes. But you can still say, "I believe in Spinoza. I love him." I would not call Spinoza's "Ethics" a book of fiction. It would mix people up too much if we were to call Spinoza and Schopenhauer fiction writers, like Tolstoy and Flaubert. In a real sense, they do not write literature. Literature has to have charm and beauty. It has to entertain the spirit. But neither are Spinoza and Schopenhauer scientists. So let's just call them philosophers.

**B:** Kant says that our minds are constructed to perceive time and space, although they may have no objective existence.

It has been shown that even existence is nothing but a category of thinking. We cannot say that something exists beyond our consciousness, that there is a thing-in-itself, be-

cause perhaps existence itself doesn't exist.

It's good that these philosophers have finally made us realize that reality is only reality from our point of view; from the point of view of our senses and our way of thinking. But although they have destroyed many illusions, they have never created anything positive. Even a man like Spinoza, who tried to give us something positive, ended up with something that became nothing. His Substance with its attributes is really again only a product of thinking, not of anything beyond it. We just don't know what a storm or a piece of wood may be if you take away man's perception of it. We don't know if the chair that stands near the mirror is reflected in the mirror when we go out of the room and don't see it. And since we are imprisoned by our senses and by our way of thinking — and since this prison will last as long as we live — we have to make peace with it. We have to deal with the things in this prison, as Plotinus and Philo called the body and the senses.

### Making Decisions

**B:** Although you speak of the prison of the senses, you also believe in freedom of choice. How can this be?

**S:** Of course, I cannot prove that it exists, but I do believe that there is free choice. And I'm, in my own way, making experiments in free choice; although free choice and experiments don't go too well together — since free choice is nothing but a matter of faith. Nevertheless, sometimes I

want to convince myself how free I am. Can I make a decision and keep it or can't I? Because all my life I made, God knows, myriads of decisions and I broke so many of them.

For example, I made a decision to get up at 8 o'clock in the morning and I got up at 10 o'clock in the evening. In Warsaw, almost every day I made a decision not to go to the writer's club to take part in the gossip . . . and immediately went and I wasted my time playing chess with some bad player while I was myself gossiping and talking nonsense. So all these decisions which I made, I almost invariably broke. Even now, in my old age, I try again and again to make decisions and keep them, hoping against hope that it is not too late and that I may succeed one day. Hope and the idea of free will are entities one cannot give up completely.

I have been wasting time since I was born, but somehow I succeeded in doing a little work, as you see. I would say that wasting time is my passion No.2; and the feeling of guilt for wasting time is my sickness No.3. To me, this feeling of guilt proves that I really believe in free choice.

### The Eternal Questions

**B:** What can a fiction writer gain from a passionate study and concern for philosophy?

**S:** I will tell you. If the novelist is not curious about philosophy, there is no reason why he should read philosophy. But the fact that he is never curious about philosophy, even when he is young, shows there's something small about him. A larger person, a bigger person, is interested in the eternal questions: Who am I? Is what we see reality? Is there any way of reaching true reality? If he sits down to read philosophy because he thinks that a writer should know philosophy, I'd tell him, "Don't read it." But if he's a real writer and a thinking man, he will be curious about it and maybe, after a while, disappointed in it. He will say, "I've had enough of philosophy," and return from abstraction to the world of the senses. That is the way of a real writer.

**B:** Dostoyevsky dramatized philosophical ideas. How have you yourself used them?

**S:** I never use them, so to say, with a purpose. But since I describe often people like myself and I am interested in

human ideas, I must be faithful to the subject. So I let my people ponder the eternal questions. I could never make the protagonist of a novel a person who would not be interested in the eternal questions.

In other words, I don't make use of philosophy with a pertinent scheme, with a plan. But since I write always about a person whom I consider a real person, he must ask himself almost constantly, "Why am I here? What am I doing here? Why was I born? Why am I to die? What is the nature of all these things which surround me?" He will always ask these questions and he will never be able to answer them. This is my own case, and perhaps your case and, more often than not, the case with most human beings.

Those writers who imagined that they found the final answers were sooner or later a disappointment to others and often to themselves. In our time, Tolstoy could serve as the example par excellence. There is no question that he died a disappointed man. His disenchantment would have been even greater if he had lived to see the Bolshevik Revolution. Just the same I have only great admiration for him and for his struggle with God and human nature.

I myself try to think that I have made peace with human blindness and God's permanent silence, but they give me no rest. I feel a deep resentment against the Almighty. My religion goes hand in hand with a profound feeling of protest. Once in a while, the old Jewish hope for the coming of the Messiah awakens in me. There must come an end to our blindness. There must come the time for some revelation! My feeling of religion is a feeling of rebellion. I even play with the idea of creating (for myself) a religion of protest. I often say to myself that God wants us to protest. He has had enough of those who praise Him all the time and bless Him for all His cruelties to man and animals.

I have written a little book which I call "Rebellion and Prayer or The True Protester." It is still in Yiddish, untranslated. It was written at the time of the Holocaust. It is a bitter little book and I doubt if I will ever publish it. Yes, I am a troubled person, but I am also joyful when I forget (for a while) the mess in which we are stuck. I may be false and contradictory in many ways, but I am a true protester. If I could, I would picket the Almighty with a sign, "Unfair to Life." ■