

## Moshe and His Brothers

The Family Mashber  
a novel by Der Nister  
("The Hidden One")  
translated from the Yiddish  
by Leonard Wolf  
Summit Books, 688 pp., \$22.95

David Malouf

There are points on the earth, some of them disconcertingly close, that seem forever blank. We cannot imagine that life goes on there in the ordinary way; we cannot imagine good weather there or any of the settled existence in time that belongs to London or Paris or even to newer places like Boston or Sydney. This is partly a matter of ignorance—who would have guessed that there is a city in the Ukraine, called Berdichev, that even in 1865 had two hundred thousand inhabitants? It is also a matter of chauvinism: a view of the world that attributes all mainstream events to Western Europe and its satellites and sees life elsewhere as so denied of history that it seems entirely dark; until, that is, in the case of eastern Poland, Belorussia, the Ukraine, it is illuminated by events of such horror (I am thinking of the sweep through those areas by the SS in 1941) that we tell ourselves, yes, these things do happen, but only in dim out-of-the-way places we know nothing of. The events then seem appropriate to the darkness of a place we have never thought of as real.

One of the achievements of *The Family Mashber*, a book that comes to us out of the blue—written in the late Thirties and only now translated from Yiddish—is that it makes this part of the world, and all its rich, exotic life, the center of things, the norm. So much so that when, in the midst of it all, a Palm Sunday frond appears, or Aristotle is mentioned, we are genuinely startled; a chunk has been opened into a strange and incomprehensible world—the familiar classical, Christian, postenlightenment one from which most of us have come. Which is to say that, like all great fictions, Der Nister's vast two-volume account of the city of N. (Berdichev) in the 1870s seizes the imagination, commands interest (even in subjects we know nothing about), imposes belief, and creates in the reading a life so deeply rooted in experience, in our sense of the way the world feels and moves, that it becomes immediately our own.

Der Nister (a pen name that in Yiddish means "The Hidden One") has been fortunate in his translator, but also in the moment Leonard Wolf has chosen to reveal him to us. A decade ago he might have presented an insoluble difficulty, but we have easier views now of what we might mean by "realism." The way to that has been prepared by Marquez and other South American writers and in English by Salman Rushdie, and we will do better to welcome *The Family Mashber* as a work of magic realism than to evoke (pace Wolf) *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Buddenbrooks*. We might be warned against such a reading by the style of the narration itself.

The plot of the novel, all that part of it that has to do with realistic events, can be dealt with quickly. The main line of it follows the fall from prosperity of the moneylender Moshe Mashber, which comes partly from his involvement with a group of Polish nobles who have got into trouble with the authorities, and cannot pay their debts, partly because the district is having a bad year, but mostly through the machinations of his fellow moneylenders in the community. His fall is

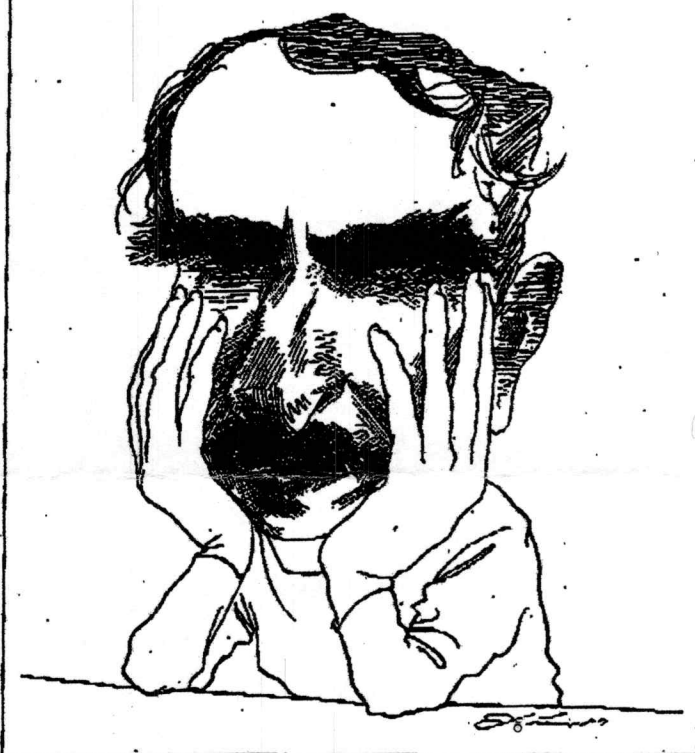
paralleled by the move of his brother Lutz from leader of the persecuted Bratslav sect of Hasidim to a life as pilgrim wanderer, and by the withdrawal of another, younger brother, Alter, a retarded idiot-saint, into isolation.

The difficulties of Moshe and his brothers serve as plot, just enough to keep us reading but more than enough to involve a large number of subsidiary characters: Reb Dudi, the representative of an ossified Jewish orthodoxy that finds itself dependent, in the end, on violence; Schmullik Fix and Yone, the tavern keeper, two very different kinds of thug; beggars like Tev Groschen Pushke; usurers like the Kitten; ruthless merchants like the effeminate Yakov-Yossi; scholars and freethinkers like Mikhl Bukyer (one of the most attractive figures in the book)

everyone's life. He has an odd facility (emphasized in the text each time as a prepared joke) for appearing on the threshold the moment anything new is about to occur. As a marginal figure the threshold is his proper place. He is a natural crosser of boundaries, as much at home with Yossie Plague, the secularist, and Schmullik Fix, whom he has the knack of putting immediately to sleep, as with the saintly Lutz. He even crosses the line into the Christian world, and not only when in his youth he becomes a waiter in poor taverns. At the Prechistaya Fair (in honor of the Virgin's birthday) he stops to hear the *bandura* players sing an old song of Cossack prisoners among the Turks:

There, in the midst of the racket of the town and the fair, in the tumult of buying and selling, and the shout-

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and Yossie Plague the enlightenment man; Polish nobles of a grotesque decadence and stiffness; Perle the bawd and baby killer; and several wives and mothers of heroic fortitude of whom the most memorable are Esther-Rokhl, Malka-Rive, and the Mashber's maid Gnessye. But the development of the plot is negligible. Everything of real significance here happens either too deep inside the characters to be touched by it or outside the plot altogether, and the center of the book is not one of the major characters but a marginal one, Srulik Gol, who works both with the plot and against it. He is the agent of another force than the one that is on the move in the social world. Everything that is most original, and most disruptive of received values in *The Family Mashber*, is in Srulik Gol. If we are to discover what the book is finally about, we can do it only through him. He is a marvelous creation.

Srulik is the least pious character in a book where everyone, even the thugs, is pious, to a point where piety itself seems suspect. He is clown, drunk, sinner, and blasphemer; a parasite at rich men's tables but also their scourge; a protector of the poor, the weak, the insulted and injured; a guide to the erring. And he intervenes at crucial points in almost

ing of thieves, a small island of people has been formed around the musician, an island of people who have taken time to feel compassion for ancient captivities—national or individual....

Yes. And the peasants in the crowd are amazed at this strange fellow, this curiously dressed Jew; where does he come from; why, like themselves, does he have tears in his eyes; why is he taking this tale of Christian suffering so much to heart, what is it that makes him give the handwringers such a large tip?

It is the insult to Srulik, a guest at his table, that creates the first rift in the Mashber family (a quarrel with Lutz) and reveals the slackening grip on family affairs that will lead to Moshe's fall. Yet it is Srulik who later saves the family from ruin. He talks about this when he sits alone drinking and addresses a wine glass as if it were Moshe himself. "It may be... that I have been designated from on high to be your incarnate punishment," Srulik says. "and that against my own will I am the whip wielded by your fate. And if that's the case, I swear by this brandy. I think you've been whipped enough." He is, one suspects, a sub-

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vanistic figure here; not just in himself but of the action as well, and most of all of that pious version of the world that Der Nister's narrative is meant to challenge. "If you want to know why I did it," Sruki goes on, speaking now of his attempts to save Moshe, "it's all because I wanted to frustrate fate for once—to pluck the rod from the wielder's hand—from fate's. That's something I have wanted to do ever since I came to the age of reason." It is part of the joke in this great scene that the tavern keeper Yone, suspecting Sruki of plotting a financial coup, has set cavedroppers on him. They can make nothing of this "confession to the second glass." The reader too is left to puzzle out the odd relationship between Sruki as whip and that other Sruki who plucks the rod from the wielder's hand.

However contradictory he may be, however unruly or blasphemous, Sruki is the one character in the book who seems to have the author's clear approval. In one of his craziest moments he appears, in a burlesque of Hasidic practices, at the grave of a famous rabbi and enters into his own form of communion with it:

The sun's heat beat down on his head. Sruki sat in a partly cooled space among tall grasses sharing his liquor with the rabbi whose name was inscribed on the headstone. A sip for him, a sip for the rabbi poured over the stone. Until finally the bottles were empty and his head—full. It felt heavy, things around him began to whirl: the cemetery, the gravestones. The trees above him seemed to rise up, roots and all; heaven and earth changed places; and everything he had seen that day, at the fair—Layb the barber-surgeon and Menashe his apprentice, cutting into abscesses on the breasts or under the armpits of peasant women, the teeth extracted with pliers, veins opened or blood drawn by leeches, and what he had seen of the blind beggars, their eyelids open or closed; and what he had seen later in Malke-Rive's home—the sick Zisyc, with sunken and yellow cheeks of a man who was more than half dead, and who bore the sign of death on his forehead; all of that, and the liquor he had drunk or poured out on the ground, mingled in his head making the world turn. He felt a spasm of nausea. Leaning his head against the gravestone he rested there awhile, then the nausea overwhelmed him and he threw up, covering the headstone from top to bottom with his vomit.

That is one side of the man. The other occurs when Sruki, in the most solemn and elevated passage in the book, plays his flute at Lutz's house:

Then Sruki played. And now he surpassed himself. His tone was so pure, the notes he struck so remarkable, that his hearers immediately forgot the poverty of their lives and who they were. Sruki seemed to have led them to a lofty palace, a spacious structure built on an appropriately elevated site amid splendid surroundings. A palace with a gate closed against intruders and against those who were unworthy to enter.

And it seemed that Sruki stood before that gate—Sruki and his listeners whom he had brought with him. And as he played he seemed to be persuading the gates to open for them because they were worthy of that honor.

"It is what they deserve," his flute seemed to say. "Now, they are the poor and the disappointed. But who can say what tomorrow will bring or who will inherit the earth on the day after tomorrow?"

With that the gate opened. Sruki and those who were with him went in. At first those who followed him felt constrained and embarrassed, because they were not sure that they had been admitted because of their own merits. But Sruki walked before them, encouraging them with the sort of music one plays to welcome guests into a palace.

And then they entered halls that were richly decorated and where there were tables with beautiful place settings. And there were people sitting there, like those whom Sruki had just brought in. They, too, were poorly clad, they, too, were sorry-looking, but they were relaxed and happy and hospitably made place for the newcomers and encouraged them to feel at ease.

Then the owners of the palace came in. They were beautifully dressed and gave the impression that they had never before had anything to do with the sorts of people Sruki had brought there, and yet they were proud of their guests. They sat with them and shared food and drink with them. Later, when they had eaten and drunk, and the newcomers started to dance, the owners of the palace danced feverishly with them all until, for sheer joy, the palace roof began to rise and all who were there cried, "Let the world be free. Let all who will come share our celebration. Everyone, from the highest to the lowest, the wise as well as those who have but a penny's worth of it. All. All. And not only people, but the creatures of the forest and the cattle in the fields are welcome too."

Two other passages appear to offer hints of how we are to fit Sruki into the novel as a whole and how we are, therefore, to read it.

Money is at the center of Moshe's story, and we might gather from this part of the book that Der Nister's attitude to it is conventional. But Sruki's use of it calls that in doubt. Sruki's reaction to money is visceral:

He remembered that one day, hearing the word "money," he was suddenly assailed by a headache and a profound pain deep in his bowels, and from that time on the word always produced nearly the same effect on him—a ghastly sense of revulsion, not only against the word "money" itself but even against those who owned it.

But Sruki too has money and he too puts it to use—though not in the commercial sense. It is the active agent of his good will. In drunken communion with Rabbi Liber's tombstone he confesses:

And it's not just his notes that I have. Not just Moshe Mashber's. I have them from others greater than he is. From the richest of the rich. I tell you I have them from Him who can say, "The silver is mine, and mine is the gold." I have them from the Creator of the World Himself, and I beg you, dear Rabbi Liber, to tell Him up there that he, so and so, son of so and so, Sruki Gol has claims and complaints against Him. One day I'll come and stand before His throne and make them myself.

but meanwhile, Reb Liber, be good enough to make them for me.

Money here, and promissory notes, have acquired a mystical quality—they are part of what gives Strul his power among men to challenge fate and reverse it—or is it to challenge the punishing figure of man and the rabbi's "God"?

Der Nister was born Pinhas Kahanevitch in Berdichev in 1885. When he began writing it was as a mystical fabulist, creating tales that derived for the most part from the Hasidic teacher Nahman of Bratslav (for those of us who know nothing of these things Leonard Wolf provides a useful introduction)—tales about angels, ghosts, doppehgänger, miracle workers, and dancing rabbis in which the "other world," the world of visions and dreams, is as real as the workaday one of marketplaces and household happenings.

The sect founded by "the Bratslaver," with Luzi at its head, is still active in *The Family Mashber*; the move to destroy it is a vivid part of the book. But more importantly Der Nister, in creating his documentary epic of Yiddish society, has kept faith with his origins as a writer by keeping the style and the narrative formula, but also the freedom, of the "tale." The action of his novel is grounded in shady deals and intrigue of every sort—a world of moneybags great and small, tavern keepers, porters, peddlers, things, beggars, whores, and rabbis of rival sects—but the book is shot through with the light of another order of being. Actuality may transform itself, at any moment, into a state in which dreams are a more significant clue to what is happening, or to motive or character, than either social background or psychology. This is true both of the large number of characters here who are god-obsessed and of those who are not, since it derives from the mind of the narrator: it is part of his mode of perception.

Der Nister as narrator is at hand in every paragraph of the work: as intermediary, picture maker, stage manager, commentator, speculator, and guide to his lost world. This form of narration, at once sophisticated and traditional, has little to do with the nineteenth-century novel but a great deal to do with a tradition of village storytelling that both engages the listener and plays with his engagement. It is full of formulations like "an observer might have noticed" or "should a stranger have approached he would have seen"; or plain statements followed by "Why?" and two or three plausible answers, then "No, that was not the principal cause, not the reason"; or Der Nister will stop the narrative altogether to create a tableau, saying, "It is necessary to see this scene clearly." Much of the ease we feel in entering this odd and unfamiliar world comes from the way the narration prepares a place for us as listeners. We are included, even before the narrator makes his world, in the voice he finds to breathe it forth.

The old-fashioned, formal mode of address—setting the reader close to the narrator but at a distance from the action—accords, I think, for the odd sense we get of the novel's being grounded in actualities of place but of floating free in time. (Thomas Mann uses a similar method, but more knowingly, in *Joseph and His Brothers*, and *The Family Mashber* seems to me to be closer to that book than to *Buddenbrooks*.) Despite a reference here and there to telegraph wires or trains, we get no sense here that we're in the nineteenth-century fictional

world of Zola or Tolstoy or Balzac. In its strict hierarchies, its definition of people according to their trade, its market fairs and taverns, its grotesqueries and gothic superstitions, *The Family Mashber* has the feel of the Middle Ages, a world not yet grounded in the secular and material, in which everything—every object, every gesture—is emblematic. This especially affects all that side of the novel that has to do with Moshe Mashber's financial ruin, which seems more like *Volpone* than *César Bretteau*, and will trouble only those who want to read the book as another nineteenth-century social documentary. For Der Nister, writing in the shadow of Stalinism in the Thirties, it must have been a conscious and necessary choice. For one thing it saved him from being too precise about the social forces that were to lead, in his own lifetime, to the revolution. More importantly, it allowed his writing to function at its richest and most original: in just that surviving medieval world of dual levels and double images that the bourgeois novel (not to speak of the social realist one) has no place for.

The third volume of *The Family Mashber* (which would have carried the tale forward into Der Nister's own lifetime) was completed but is lost. Der Nister himself was arrested with other Yiddish writers in 1950 and soon died in a prison hospital. Without it we cannot judge the novel's final shape. The opening, however, is full of foreboding, and not just for the family Mashber. Der Nister ends his evocation of the rich life of the city, its market, its synagogues of every kind, by suggesting that "anyone with a keen eye might even then have been able to see the seeds of the future floating in the air."

That future, as Der Nister knew, was dissolution: through secularization during the revolution, extermination by the Nazis, and official persecution under Stalin.

Should a stranger come to the market, and should he stay for a while, he would very soon get a whiff of dissolution, the first hint that very soon the full stink of death would arise from the whole shabang: the buying and selling, the hulla-balloo of wheeling and dealing, the entire giddiness of all those whirling there.... If a stranger did show up, we say...if he were a man with somewhat refined sensibilities, he would feel grief at his heart, he would sense that the thresholds on which the night watchmen sat were already mourning thresholds, that the sealed doors, chain and locks would never be replaced, and that to enlarge the picture, to frame it truly, one would need to hang a death lamp to burn quietly here in the middle of the market to be a memorial to the place itself.

What is remarkable, given the elegiac note, is that the picture "truly framed," the world of the book itself, is so unemotional. The life it resurrects, a whole culture in fact, for all its obsession with God and the Law, is neither better nor worse than any other: the seeds of corruption and dissolution are within it. Whatever Der Nister may have felt about the historical forces, this society as he paints it has all it needs of fanaticism, intolerance, injustice, and crude violence to destroy it from within. Over and over again we see Moshe Mashber's household, the image of security and stable middle-class prosperity, savagely disrupted: by the screams of the "idiot" brother Alter, by the arrival at Moshe's

table of the hired bully Schnutikl Flit, at last by the mob of looters. Outside this household, the religious leader, Reb Dudi, in a rigid and inhuman adherence to the Law, rejects the freethinking scholar Mikhl Dukyer, condones his destruction, and in the persecution of the Bratslaver sect the rabbi allows town thugs to become the effective arm of his authority. At the end the whole community reverts to a state of blind superstition, haunted by

miracle workers, all sorts of fortune-tellers, Jewish and non-Jewish,... seekers after easy money, magicians, mazuzah examiners, squint-eyed cabalists who wore sheepskin and woolen socks in summer and in winter and who pulled their magic remedies and philters out of their filthy breast pockets.... Famous real miracle rabbis from abroad,... esoteric pilgrims... from Jerusalem and Safed, from Turkey and Yemen.

This is a world, to make a phrase from earlier in the book, that is "giddily whirling," and not in ecstasy.

In all this moral and spiritual disintegration, the figures who stand out are the apostates: Strul, Mikhl Dukyer, Yessie Plague, the rationalist with his schemes for social improvement (though we know where some of those lead), and the saintly Luzi, whom we respect mostly because Strul does. One of Strul's great moments toward the end is a dream in which he sees Mikhl Dukyer, who has rejected Judaism, as one of the true liberators:

He dreamed:

That Luzi was somehow the owner of a large garden fenced in on all sides and kept closed and locked. And Mikhl was the watchman there. But then he noticed that the garden fence was not a normal one. Rather it was like a prison wall. It was too tall to climb over and there was no crack or opening in it anywhere that would have permitted anyone to look in. Then Strul saw that Luzi no longer had the look of an owner, but rather of a prisoner of this garden. Strul was very distressed by this but there was no way to get in to help him. Then suddenly he saw that the wall was warping, groaning, and the deeply rooted pillars holding it up heaved and toppled, bringing the entire wall crashing down with them. And then when the wall had fallen, Mikhl, with a pleased smile on his face, appeared in the garden as if he alone, all by himself, had demolished the wall...or in any event as if he had been made very happy by its fall. And then the look of joy on his face was changed to the look of deep woe on the face of one who has labored with might and main to destroy something only to feel himself destroyed in the process. Strul, grateful to him for his work of liberation, hurried over to thank him and to express his sympathy.

In the event, fifty years after it was written, the great achievement of *The Family Mashber* is to have re-created with such passionate objectivity, in all its complexity and breadth, a world that exists now only in this enduring memorial to it—which is one of the things that literature, of all the arts, can most grandly do. *The Family Mashber* is, finally, a book that leads us, like Strul, to cross thresholds, most of all the threshold of our own experience; to enter in and be moved like him by the "spirit of celebration." □

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