

Until it shines: The art of translating I.B. Singer

By DEBORAH MENASHE

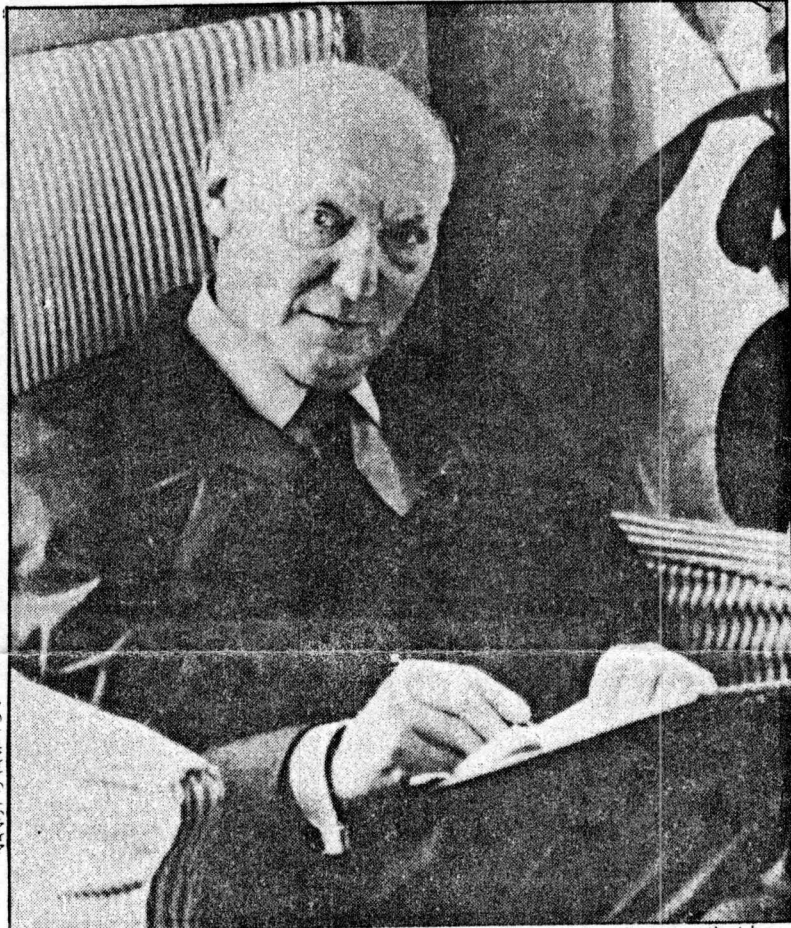
The room Isaac Bashevis Singer calls his "chaos room" is actually a treasure house of stories. Old Yiddish newspapers and journals are piled high to the ceiling. Edited manuscripts are crammed into crushed European trunks, jutting out of antique desks, packed between volumes of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, *Fate* magazine, Hebrew and Yiddish poetry, and anthologies of ghost stories. Lost pens, misplaced bills, even entire galleys mysteriously appear there.

The room has a life of its own. It breathes. The walls pulsate with 40 years of literary effort. Once, after long searching for a contract for his drama, *A Play for the Devil*, Isaac cried out, "Let me tell you, I can say I have accomplished one thing in my life; my chaos has reached perfection."

Remarkably, Isaac knows each and every corner of the chaos room. Every cluster of yellowing newspaper, every crumbling issue of *The Jewish Daily Forward*, has meaning. Once, Robert Giroux, Isaac's longtime editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, called to mention that Joseph Papp was preparing to direct *The Golem* for the New York Shakespeare Festival. Giroux was interested in Isaac's version of the story that had been published in 1969 in the *Forward*.

The medieval legend of the golem has been told in many versions by some of the greatest Hebrew and Yiddish writers: H. Leivick, Chaim Bloch, Abraham Rothberg, and many others. Isaac's story takes place in 16th century Prague during the time of a terrible blood libel. A clay giant is created and brought to life formed into a golem by the renowned scholar and Kabbalist, Rabbi Judah Leib. Rabbi Leib engraves the holiest name of God on the golem's forehead and with the power of that sacred name, the golem is able to perform great miracles and save the Jews from their enemies.

Giroux spoke of the possibility of a publication for children. In an in-



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stant, Isaac hopped from the sofa and ran with the lightness of a bird to the back room. He opened a closet full of old black and navy suits and at least 15 pairs of shoes. (Although most of the shoes were tight, Isaac had bought them in order not to disappoint the storcowner.) He crouched down over the shoes and rummaged through piles of manila envelopes. As we searched through the piles, looking for *The Golem*, lifting Yiddish essays and stories published in the '40s and '50s, Isaac pleaded, "Be careful, be very careful. These papers are like spiderwebs."

Finally, he pulled out a worn envelope with the Yiddish words, "*Der Golem, a mavse far kinder un dervaksine*" scribbled on top: "The Golem, a story for children and adults."

Autumn in Paradise

We translated *The Golem* during the fall of 1981 in Surfside, Florida, where Isaac lives part of the year. The hotel room faces the ocean. The sun pours in, seagulls screech, waves crash, and the whole primeval atmosphere gives one the feeling of being in Paradise. The wobbly table and the old Smith-Corona only add to the charm and ambience of the room.

Isaac sits in the white leather armchair with his back to the sea. The pale blue water resembles the color of his eyes and it appears as if the ocean is reflected in them. As he works, he makes countless changes and additions. In the original text, just after Rabbi Leib had completed his creation of the golem, the passage read:

For a long while Rabbi Leib gaped

Dear David, My Original title is: "Vee Vill Polish it Until It Will Shine!"
A few other

papers left it as it was
Look forward to seeing your issue

Deborah

P.S.
I found a few minor typos...

at the golem, perplexed by his own deeds. A strange thought ran through his mind: "If those who deny that God created the world could witness what I, a man born from the womb of a woman, have done, they would be ashamed of their heresy. However, such is the power of Satan, that he can blind people's eyes and confuse their minds. Satan, too, was created by God so that man should have free will to choose between good and evil."

As he was reviewing these lines, Isaac stopped in the middle. He lifted his head, looked up to the ceiling. Chewing on the tip of his pen, he stared into space. Suddenly he began to scribble feverishly in a little notebook he keeps in his shirt pocket. After some time he was ready. "Come. Come over dahlink, ve needed a few raisins in our kugel."

The paragraph is omitted and a description is added:

For a long while Rabbi Leib gaped at the golem perplexed by his own deeds. How strange the synagogue attic looked in the dim light of the lantern! In the corners, huge spiderwebs hung down from the rafters. On the floor lay old and torn prayer shawls, broken rams' horns, candelabra, scroll cases, parts of candlesticks, Chanukah lamps as well as faded pages of manuscripts written by unknown or forgotten authors. Pillars of dust reflected the colors of the rainbow. There was a silence in the room of those who suffered, served God, withstood both persecution and temptation and became speechless forever.

After extensive reworking the final version included the original paragraph about God and Satan and

also an added, enchanting description:

On the floor lay old and torn prayer shawls, broken candelabra, scroll cases, parts of candlesticks, Chanukah lamps, as well as faded pages of manuscripts written by unknown or forgotten scribes. Through crevices and holes in the roof, moonlit dust reflected the colors of the rainbow. One could sense the spirits of generations who had lived, suffered, served God, withstood persecution and temptation and became speechless forever.

Until it Shines

"I am quite lucky," Isaac repeats merrily. "In the process of translation, I see all my faults. A story loses 50 percent in translation, so it must be 150 percent to make up for the loss." He works and re-works a story with fervor, exclaiming, "Ve vill polish it until it vill shine!"

Folklore, specifically, presents deep problems in translation. In *The Golem*, for example, Rabbi Leib is visited one night by a poor wanderer. The beggar refuses to stay, saying he has only come to tell the rabbi one thing: Create a golem. Rabbi Leib realizes the pauper is no ordinary man, but a *lamed-vovnik*.

(The letter "lamed" in the Hebrew alphabet is equivalent to the number 30 and the letter "vov" is equivalent to the number six. There is a belief expressed in the Talmud that at all times there exist 36 hidden saints who do good deeds and serve the needy but who never reveal their true identity. It is said that their virtues serve as pillars to sustain the entire world. They perform their acts of goodness in secret so even if one lived next door to you, you would never know it. To this day, knowledgeable Jews, when referring to an

exceptionally charitable and saintly soul, will call him a "real *lamed-vovnik*.")

Initially, Isaac wanted to translate the passage simply as "a saintly man entered," but I encouraged him to retain the flavor of the folk legend. In the final version it read:

Rabbi Leib realized that the stranger might be one of the 36 saints through whose merit the world exists, according to tradition.

A final example of changes made in the process of translation can be seen in the way the concept of love was handled in last paragraph of *The Golem*. We had met with a Baruch College professor of Yiddish, Jean Jofen, who was visiting Miami. We were speaking about the golem and the notion that dead matter could be brought to life.

Isaac said the golem represented potentiality, like an embryo. He spoke of the legend about the famous Jewish poet and philosopher, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, who during a severe illness created a female golem for himself, which he used as a maidservant and a concubine.

This led to a discussion about love. Professor Jofen commented that the love she knew as a child gave her the strength to face abuse and hardship in her adult life. Isaac agreed that love is essentially what provides courage, saying, "My parents loved me as a child with a great love. My father would urge me to study the Gemara, but I was happy to play with his beard. I was pleading with him, 'Later, later,' and he allowed me to continue playing."

Isaac's golem, we realized, was equally encouraged by love. He falls in love with Miriam, an orphan girl.

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Singer

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In the end, after the golem runs amok through the city and Rabbi Leib has lost all control over his creation, he orders Miriam to erase the Holy Name from the golem's forehead. She gets him drunk in the basement of Rabbi Leib's house, and the rabbi comes down and erases the name. He "kissed the place where the Holy Name was and the golem became lifeless."

Originally the last passage read: *Miriam disappeared and the rumors have it that the golem is awaiting her in a far-off place where kosher Jewish daughters dwell with*

spirits, demons, lapitudes or possibly with clay or bronze creatures whom love has resurrected. Love, it seems, may have the same mysterious power as a Holy Name.

But after his talk with Jean Jofen and remembering that the story was meant for young adults, Isaac decided to enhance the "loving" theme:

Miriam disappeared and the rumors have it that the golem was waiting for her in the darkness and took her with him to a place where loving spirits meet. Who knows? Perhaps love has even more power than a Holy Name. Love, once engraved in the heart, can never be erased. It lives on forever.

"You see, dahling, you see?" Isaac said when he finished the first draft. "You are in the factory of literature. You are learning more than you could in any university."

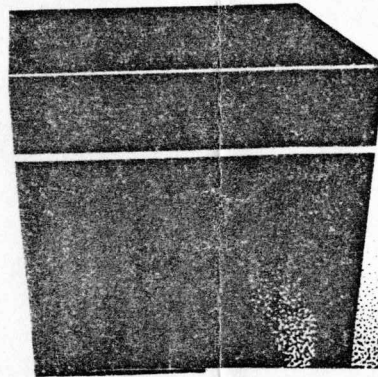
"Yes, I answered playfully. "You are forming me like Rabbi Leib formed his golem."

Isaac laughed and answered, "Then you must behave." He recalled George Bernard Shaw's heroine in *Pygmalion*, and remarked: "Once he made her into a lady, he could never reverse it anymore."

Immersion and Devotion

The most striking facet of Isaac's life is his intensive and passionate absorption in his work. His fiction spills over into his life and his life spills back into his work. Once, when he was describing a fire in a story, he jumped up from his chair trembling, sure that he had smelled smoke. The Chanukah story, *Menashe and Rachel*, tells of two blind children who sit beside a Chanukah lamp and reveal to one another what they

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whispers to Menashe that at night when she cannot fall asleep, she sees lights, birds, six-winged angels, and even the moon.

During the editing, Isaac lay down for a nap. Before dozing off, he reminisced, "As a child, I saw things all the time. Until today, I see unusual things. Yes. There were lights. Colors. Fantastic colors. Birds, of course. All the time." As he spoke his face was transformed. It had regained the awe and wonder of a young boy. "When I told my father about these visions, he warned me never to tell my mother about such things. It would upset her. And believe me, there was great love in these words."

Another time, at a lecture in Birmingham, Alabama, a woman mentioned she had read *One Night in Brazil*, a story about two lovers who fall out of a hammock and get brutally bitten by mosquitos. The woman made a face and said that when she read his description she began scratching her arms. Isaac was delighted. "What a better world it would be if we all scratched our arms when other people were itching."

And later, to me, he said, "This is a very important lesson for you. The reader should be so interested in the story that he forgets himself and feels the same itch you are describing."

This total immersion and devotion to the work at hand gave Isaac an extraordinary power of concentration.

After the first drafts of the translation of *The Golem* he had to be hospitalized for several days, for minor stomach problems. I came every day with lists of notes and, despite his illness, he worked non-stop. Even the nurses were amazed at their tireless patient. I was embarrassed to express my own fatigue.

Finally, at one point, when my attention was apparently wavering, Isaac kibitzed me, "An ox must work!" He told me that as a young man he would also get tired all the time and he would write short inspirational poems to himself in Yiddish and repeat them over and over

poems in the hospital. It was one of many poems of Isaac's I was to learn. We played a little game; if I memorized it perfectly, I got a quarter:

*"U bicharte b'chaim."
B'chira iz gut.*

B'chira iz der zin fun leben.

Altz vos gaut haut unz gegeben.

B'chira iz tat, gedank, un vaurt.

B'chira in yede tzait un aurt.

Di oynztike recht gegeben dem knecht.

Iz der apkloib fun gut un shlect.

Di greste gvore, der hechster genus.

Iz bashlisin un taun loit dem bashlus.

A kol geyt oif fun taul un barg

"Gaut vil koich, mentch zay shtark."

It translates as follows:

"And thou shall choose life."

Free choice is good.

Free choice is necessary every minute.

Free choice is the meaning of life, Everything given to us by the Almighty.

Free choice is deed, thought, and word.

In every time and at every fort. The only right bestowed upon a slave

Is the right to choose between good and depraved.

The greatest strength, the most exalted pleasure,

Is to decide and to do according to one's measure.

A voice goes up from every mountain and every valley,

"God wants strength, people be strong."

I earned my quarter fair and square.

We worked on *The Golem* for about two months. At the end, excited by the way the story took shape, I expressed great satisfaction for the job we had done. "Do you see how well we polished it?"

Isaac, however, nodded dreamily and waved his arm in the air. "Aaach!" he pronounced. "It's all in God's hands." □