

Isaac Bashevis Singer: Portrait of a Magician

by Isidore Haiblum

THE POLISH-BORN NOBEL PRIZEWINNER
IS REVERED THROUGHOUT THE WORLD
FOR HIS VISION AND HUMANITY.
AND HE ALSO WRITES GOOD HORROR STORIES.

With a Nobel Prize safely tucked under one arm and dozens of masterworks under the other, Isaac Bashevis Singer strides through his eighth decade, still making literary history. He writes in Yiddish, a language once spoken by eleven million people but now by only a fourth as many, yet he is read the world over.

Born in Leoncin, Poland, in 1904 (not Radzymin, as is usually reported), he grew up in a tenement on Warsaw's Krochmalna Street. His father, a rabbi, judged religious disputes for the neighborhood poor. Young Isaac took it all in, and years later, when he became a writer, made good use of the characters and tales he first encountered in his parents' flat.

"My father was always busy, and my mother really didn't keep the dogma one hundred percent," Singer says. "The result was that I remained a child longer, unlike other Hasidic children. For a writer, that's necessary—a light childhood, not bound by dogma."

Up until the age of twelve, Singer read only Hebrew books. Then, to his great delight, he came across a Sherlock Holmes collection. "Every story," he says, "sounded to me like heavenly music."

His older brother, the novelist Israel Joshua Singer, brought home *Crime and Punishment*. Young Isaac read it avidly. Dostoyevsky was followed by Tolstoy, the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Edgar Allan Poe. "The moment I had a chance," Singer says, "I began to read world literature in

Yiddish, and in Polish, and also in German—I learned these languages by myself."

When Singer was nearing fifteen, his mother had a dream in which she saw her father, his face all aglow, obviously bound for heaven. Convinced her father was dying, she and Isaac left Warsaw for her native village of Bilgoray, bribing an official in order to get the necessary visa. (Those were the days of the First World War, and the Germans controlled Poland.) Once there, it was no easy matter to leave. Poverty anchored Singer and his mother to the village for four years. (The dream, incidentally, had been prophetic, for Singer's grandfather had indeed died; Singer attributes his belief in the occult partly to the accuracy of his mother's dreams. His assumed middle name, Bashevis, is derived from her first name, Bathsheba, in homage.)

For Singer, the experience in Bilgoray was pivotal, determining the course of much of his future fiction. It was in this little village that he began to browse seriously in the mystical, forbidden cabala, the ancient Jewish teachings—especially as set down in the *Sefer Yezirah* ("Book of Creation") and the *Zohar* ("Splendor")—which find mystical meanings in the letters and words of the scriptures. "According to the Law, a man should not study cabala before he is thirty, but I used to remove the books from the study house," Singer says. "In fact, I almost stole them."

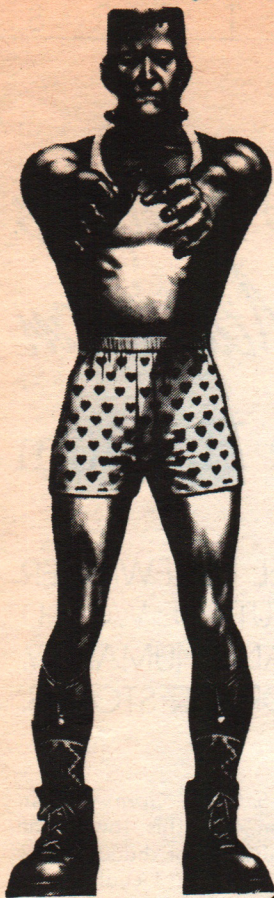
The apocalyptic, messianic world depicted in the cabala can be found in

Singer's novel *Satan in Goray* and in his later fiction. "In this town," he says, "the traditions of hundreds of years ago still lived.... I could never have written *Satan in Goray* or some of my other stories without having been there."

Not only his father but both his grandfathers were rabbis; he himself attended a yeshiva (religious school) and a rabbinical seminary, yet did not enter the family business. "I couldn't have become a rabbi," Singer says, "because I am against dogma—although I believe in higher powers."

His elder brother, whose novel *The Brothers Ashkenazi* became an American hit in 1936, served as a role model for Isaac. "It was a great shock to my parents," Singer says of his decision to follow in his brother's footsteps and become a writer. "They considered all the secular Yiddish writers to be heretics, unbelievers. They really were, too, most of them."

By 1923, Singer was a proofreader for *Literarische Bletter* ("Literary Pages"), a Yiddish literary magazine. He also translated everything from pulp novels to serious literature into Yiddish, including such works as Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and Knut Hamsun's *Pan* and *Victoria*. Singer has some reservations about these early efforts: "I didn't do them as carefully as I might have, but the Yiddish readers were so eager to get in touch with the rest of the world that a bad translation was better than none."



CUT-UPS

What will the well-dressed monster be wearing in 1984? According to *Monster Paper Dolls* (Congdon & Weed, \$5.95), the new cut-out book by Jill Bauman and TZ cover artist Walter Velez, the Wolf Man will don football gear this fall and a Santa suit at Christmas, Count Dracula will play Hamlet with a real skull in his hand, and Frankenstein's Bride will turn rock star in a tight green jumpsuit. As for Frankenstein himself (left), you can see what he'll be wearing this Easter.

NIGHTY-NIGHT

If children have been good all day,
And kept their tongues and lips quite clean,
They dream of flowers that nod and play,
And fairies dancing on the green.

But if they've spoken naughty words,
Or told a lie, they dream of rats;
Of crawling snakes, and ugly birds;
Of centipedes, and vampire bats.

—"Dreams" by Gabriel Setoun, from *The Child World* (Shambhala, Boulder CO, 1979)

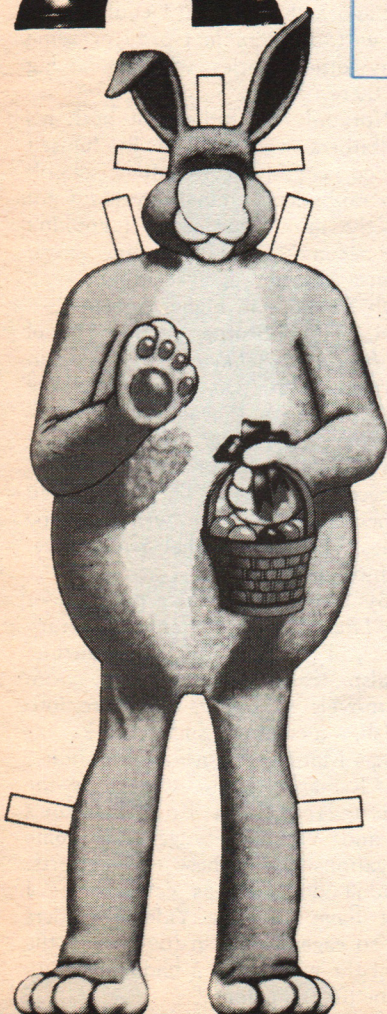


TZ IN THE SKY

The ever-watchful Californian, Mark Rathbun—whose hometown of Chico is not far from Auburn, home of fantasy great Clark Ashton Smith—has discovered an interesting reference to the Zone in the final paragraph of Smith's "The Immortals of Mercury":

"It was not the familiar twilight zone of Mercury in which he had come forth—it was the bleak, nightward side, eternally averted from the sun, and blasted with the frightful cold of cosmic space."

—from *Tales of Science and Sorcery*, Arkham House, 1964



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Singer's first short story, "Women," appeared in *Literarische Bletter* in 1927, followed by "Grandchildren" and "The Village Gravedigger" in *Warsawer Shriften* ("Warsaw Writings"). A literary career was thus launched which would provide future translators of Yiddish the world over with plenty of work.

Israel Joshua was already living in America when Singer decided to emigrate in 1935. "It was inevitable," he says, "after Hitler came to power that the Germans would invade Poland." A pessimist by nature, Singer took Hitler's threat to wipe out the Jews of Europe seriously.

The first years in New York were gloomy ones. Singer felt cut off from his roots. Perceiving that Yiddish was a dying language in the USA, he ceased to write creatively, supporting himself again as a translator and freelance Yid-

dish journalist. His memoir of these years is aptly called *Lost in America*.

Gradually, over a five-year period, Singer came to himself and went to work full-time for the *Yiddish Daily Forward*. The *Forward* has now become a weekly, and the quarter of a million readers it enjoyed in 1914 has now shrunk to twenty thousand, but Singer still first publishes much of his fiction and nonfiction there. He says he will always write in Yiddish: "Yiddish contains vitamins that other languages don't have."

Rebecca West, the grande dame of English letters, has said simply, "I regard Isaac Bashevis Singer as the greatest writer of today." Most critics agree that he has few equals in his mastery of diverse fictional forms. He has turned out huge social novels depicting whole societies. Stephen Longstreet wrote of *The Family*

Moskat: "A masterwork and a classic ... as good as *Buddenbrooks* and *The Forsyte Saga*." And the *Christian Science Monitor* said: "[It] is a great novel, written in the marvelous tradition of the ... European novel created by Flaubert." *The Family Moskat* offers a sweeping, panoramic portrait of Jewish life in Warsaw from the beginning of this century to Hitler's terror. Its cast of characters is vast. And the style here, as in his other epic novels, *The Manor* and *The Estate*, is strictly realistic.

These books, however, are quite different from his shorter novels. Note what *Newsweek* had to say about *The Magician of Lublin* and see if you think the same author is being discussed: "A witch's brew of Gogol, Poe, the Gothic novelists and Hasidic fabulists, and a high originality, the source of which is not of this world." Hardly



At a ceremony in Stockholm in the fall of 1978, Singer receives the Nobel Prize for Literature—the only Yiddish writer ever to do so.

a realistic epic. Here, Yasha Mazur, the single main character, a Houdini-like escape artist of the late nineteenth century, wrestles with the notion of using his magician's talents to commit a crime. A hedonist and Don Juan, Mazur will end up a penitent ascetic.

The Slave, set in seventeenth-century Poland, was hailed by the *Los Angeles Times* as the "most moving and powerful love story in modern literature." Again Singer had struck a new note. *The Slave* tells of Jacob, a devout captive Jew, and the gentile girl Wanda—his master's daughter—with whom he falls hopelessly, and catastrophically, in love.

In *Enemies*, *A Love Story*, the same author, according to the *Boston*

Herald Traveler, has written "a kind of bizarre Jewish-Shakespearean comedy ... told with a kind of black humor that is hilarious." *Enemies'* hero, Herman Broder, has three wives, all alive and well and living in New York—one in the Bronx, one in Brooklyn, and one on Eighteenth Street in Manhattan. Singer says, "In every Yiddish heart there is a humor dictionary."

Could all this be the work of one man? Hard to believe. And we have not yet even come to Singer's short stories. Many critics believe these to be his crowning achievements. "His best work," writes the critic Irving Howe, "has been done in short forms, the novella and the story—exciting bursts and flares of the imagination." And

Newsweek's Peter Prescott has said, "Isaac Bashevis Singer, in his short and humorous tales drawn from an old tradition, celebrates the dignity, mystery and unexpected joy of living with more art and fervor than any other writer alive."

For many of his readers, Singer is an author who sometimes pens bittersweet tales of aged couples living in Miami ("Old Love"). But he can also chill the blood. In *Satan in Goray*, his first novel, written in Poland in 1933, Singer unleashes mass hysteria, orgiastic sex, and Satan himself on a hapless rural townlet. In the first paragraph, we find:

They slaughtered on every hand, flayed men alive, murdered small children, violated women and afterward ripped open their bellies and sewed cats inside.... For weeks after the razing of Goray, the corpses lay neglected in every street, with no one to bury them. Savage dogs tugged at dismembered limbs, and vultures and crows fed on human flesh.

Or later, after Rechele, one of the novel's central characters, has been impregnated by Satan:

Rechele suffered extraordinary tortures. At times the evil one blew up one of her breasts. One foot swelled. Her neck became stiff. Rechele extracted little stones, hairs, rags, and worms from wet, pussy abscesses formed on the flesh of her thigh and under her arms. Though she had long since stopped eating, Rechele vomited frequently, venting reptiles that slithered out tail first.

Many of Singer's stories are told by devils, demons, and even Satan. "The Destruction of Kreshev" begins, "I am the Primeval Snake, the Evil One, Satan. The cabala refers to me as Samael and the Jews sometimes call me merely, 'that one.'" "The Last Demon" begins, "I, a demon, bear witness that there are no more demons left. Why demons, when man himself is a demon?" The devil narrates "The Unseen": "They say that I, the evil spirit, after descending to earth in order to induce people to sin, will then ascend to heaven to accuse them. As a matter of fact I am also the one to give the sinner the first push...." Singer says, "The supernatural expresses the subconscious better than any other events a writer can write about." He has also said, "I feel sometimes I am

half a devil myself." A recurring theme in his stories, Singer adds, is "always reminding people that there are powers in the world that we don't know, that the supernatural is here, among us."

So in his short story "The Gentleman From Cracow," Katev Mriri, Chief of the Devils, puts in an appearance and debauches an entire town: "Witches, werewolves, imps, demons and hobgoblins plummeted from the sky, some on brooms, others on hoops, still others on spiders." This tale is a satire, no less. But not "The Black Wedding." Here a character named Hindele is compelled to wed a demon and give birth to a devil:

All night long Hindele felt herself lying in blood and pus. The one who raped her snorted, coughed, hissed like an adder. Before dawn a group of hags ran into the room, pulled the sheet from under her, inspected it, sniffed it, began to dance. That night never ended. True, the sun rose. It was not really the sun, though, but a bloody sphere which somebody hung in the sky.

Or so the sexually repressed heroine believes. For in Singer's work, only a thin line separates madness from the supernatural.

Yet the same author can turn out the heartwarming "The Spinoza of Market Street," a love story about a philosopher and his cleaning maid. Or "The Little Shoemakers," a tale of courage and hope, in which a refugee from Hitler's atrocities tries to rebuild his life in America. Or "Gimpel the Fool," his classic tale of a saintly nitwit, which the poet Kenneth Rexroth has hailed as "among the most heart-piercing, penetrating, unforgettable stories ever written."

His novels as well as his short stories gleam with rich descriptive details; they are verbal symphonies of sights, sounds, and smells. Witness, for example, this passage from *The Family Moskat*:

In the middle of the street, truckmen guided overloaded wagons. The heavy, low-slung horses stamped their iron-shod hoofs on the cobbles, sending out sparks. A porter wearing a hat with a brass badge carried an enormous basket of coal strapped to his shoulders with thick rope. A janitor in an oilcloth cap and blue apron was sweeping a square of pavement with a long broom. Youngsters, their little lovelocks flapping under octagonal caps,

were pouring out of the doors of the Hebrew schools, their patched pants peeping out from beneath the skirts of their long coats.... A dwarf with an oversized head wandered about with a bundle of leather whips, fanning the straps back and forth, demonstrating how to whip stubborn children.

As the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* put it about *The Family Moskat* (and as can be said of many of Singer's works): "The novel is far more than a fascinating narrative of a family, it is the story of a whole civilization that is gone forever." Depicting whole civilizations is no mean trick. *The Family Moskat*, especially in its two-volume Yiddish version, has acquainted the author of this piece with all his Warsaw ancestors—how they looked, thought, spoke, and acted.

Singer is always a safe and dependable guide through the ages, whether in the Goray of 1666, the Poland of the nineteenth century, or (in *Enemies*) Brooklyn's Coney Island:

...the hot wind struck him and the sweet smell of popcorn. Barkers urged people into amusement parks and side shows. There were carousels, shooting galleries, mediums who would conjure the spirits of the dead for fifty cents. At the subway entrance, a puffy-eyed Italian was banging a long knife against an iron bar, calling out a single word again and again, in a voice that carried over all the tumult. He was selling cotton candy and soft ice cream that melted as soon as it was put into a cone. On the other side of the Boardwalk, the ocean sparkled beyond a swarm of bodies.

Singer has an eye for the telling detail that nails the reader to a specific time and place. "I would say that literature must have an address, that it just cannot be in a vacuum," he explains. "This is very important. Many modern writers would like to get rid of this and write about humanity—general humanity, just abstract human beings. This cannot be done."

Singer's art has justly been called universal. It is his unceasing attention to detail in both character and setting—to the specifics of the human condition—that has helped make it so.

Often Singer's characters (not unlike their author) will agonize over the meaning of life. "Why was I born? When will I die? What will be later? This feeling of bewilderment," Singer says, "was with me all my life. I

remember myself at two years looking around and asking myself, not in words, actually, what's going on here? There was a pig and a dog and a sky—and I'm just as much astonished now as I was then."

No sage in Singer's pages turns up with the definitive answer to these eternal queries—although his characters (again, like Singer himself) never cease looking. In Singer's fiction no statesman will manage to build a better world. No gallant knight will arrive on horseback to save the day. Singer does not believe in these secular heroes—he feels they do more harm than good. "To me," Singer said, "Shabbatai Zevi [the most influential of medieval false messiahs] was the symbol of the man who tries to do good and comes out bad. In other words, for me Shabbatai Zevi is in a way Stalin and all these people who tried so hard to create a better world and who ended up by creating the greatest misery." Singer's characters have their hands full just trying to control their own wayward passions; it is a full-time job.

His narrative pace—especially in his short stories—is breathless; it unwinds with a dazzling swiftness, compelling the reader to keep turning pages. His insistence on telling a story is almost a novelty among serious contemporary authors. Singer feels that his work has profited from first being published in serial form in the *Forward*: "When you write this way, you remember that there must be some tension in your work. The reader should be eager to read the next installment."

For non-Yiddish-speaking readers, the unhappy problem of translation persists. As Irving Howe writes: "No translation . . . could possibly suggest the full idiomatic richness and syntactical verve of Singer's Yiddish." Says Singer himself: "A friend of mine, also a Yiddish writer, once came to me for some advice. . . . I told him that he must be prepared to lose at least forty percent in translation, and to make sure that the other sixty percent had some worth. Or better still, to write something 140 percent."

Singer, following his own prescription, has been writing 140 percent. As he approaches his eighties, his vigor remains undiminished, and new novels, short stories, and memoirs of the highest order keep pouring out. He is a master magician who continues to bring marvels into the world. 17

'These Hidden Powers Are Everywhere'

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER DISCUSSES
MIRACLES, DEMONS, AND THE AFTERLIFE
WITH INTERVIEWER ISIDORE HAIBLUM.

TZ: It's known that as a young man you read books about the supernatural and ESP. Was this unusual in your community?

Singer: It wasn't called ESP. It was stories, and the stories—Jewish stories, Yiddish stories—were always full of miracles. God did miracles to the just, and He also punished, by miracles, the villains. Of course, we didn't feel there was something unusual about miracles, you know. The whole Jewish life in the Exile was one big miracle.

TZ: Later, though, you went on to read scientific books, which convinced you that there *were* hidden forces in the world.

Singer: Not so quickly. When I began to read the worldly books, they were against miracles. They made fun of miracles. Like Spinoza and others—they said all this was fanaticism and superstition, that there aren't such things as miracles, there's only nature. Nature has its stable laws, and so on and so on. But then, in later years—I would say when I was already in my twenties—I discovered the so-called supernatural. Dr. Rhine and ESP were not known then. Or maybe they didn't study it then; Dr. Rhine was a young man. You know who Dr. Rhine is?

TZ: Yes indeed.*

Singer: But later on I began to see that all these miracles are not complete superstition. I began to feel that the laws of nature are stable, they are permanent, but that God can *change* nature. I also got this feeling that nature itself adjusts itself to higher powers.

TZ: In your own books, there is a lot to do with demons and with devils, but very little to do with angels.

Singer: Well, I'll tell you, angels are not a good material for fiction, because we know in advance what an angel is. He's going to do only good things.

He's on the side of God. So he's too predictable, and fiction does not like what is predictable. With a devil, with a demon, you never *know* what he will do. Because of this, they are better material.

TZ: You believe that hidden forces are at work in this world. Are they mostly demonic, or are there also forces for good?

Singer: I believe there are forces for good, too. There's no question about it. I even think that in the long run the forces which work for good are stronger; they are nearer to God. However,

'Life is a
very
terrifying
business.'

I write mostly about the demons because they make good fiction. Also, even if the ending is going to be a happy one, the demons have to be first, to play their nasty games.

TZ: As a writer, you have lived in Warsaw and in New York. How have these places differed in relation to your work?

Singer: I would say that in Warsaw, in Poland, I felt the existence of the supernatural *nearer*, much more than I felt it in New York. When I came to New York, my first feeling was that here there would be no demons—that here everything was so practical, so pragmatic, that there was no place for my fantasies. However, after a while I came to the conclusion that these hidden powers are everywhere. No subway, no electricity, no radios can really drive them away completely.

TZ: Since you've achieved the top

rung in literature, and since you happen to be a fantasy writer, have you ever thought that, if you had to do it all over, you might want to live a different life? For instance, would you want to be a statesman?

Singer: Not at all. I never wanted anything but to be a writer.

TZ: Not a composer, not an explorer?

Singer: Absolutely not!

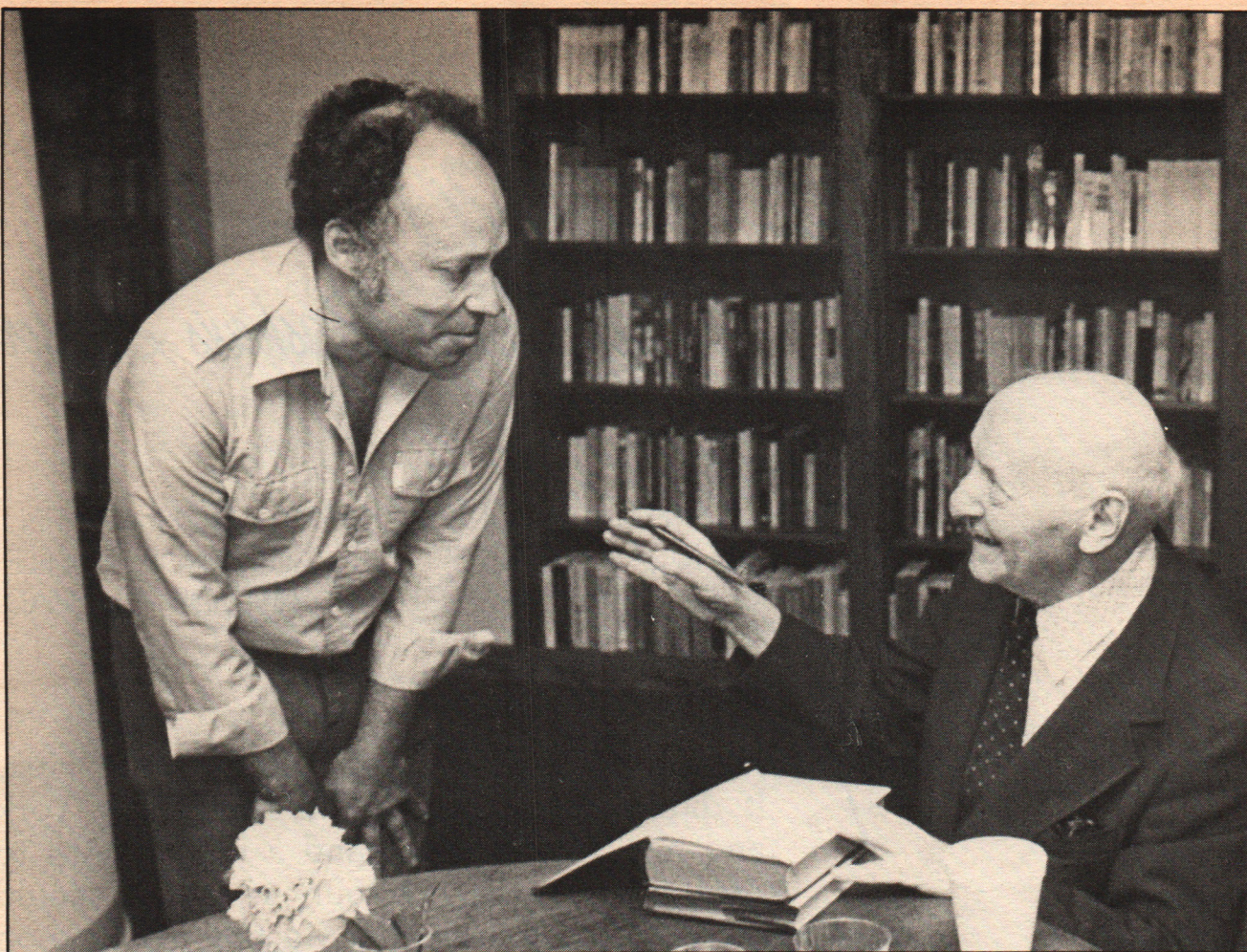
TZ: Just asking. Do you personally believe in an afterlife?

Singer: Well, I will tell you. I say this: as far as I know there has never been any evidence that there is a life after death. However, I say to myself that death itself cannot be for nothing, all negative and all nothingness. I believe that the whole universe is actually alive, that human life and the life of the animals is a part of the life of the universe. When a human being dies, his body stops being alive in the form which *we* know, what *we* call life. But there are, to my mind, many many other forms of life. Sometimes, let's say, it would be very easy for me to believe that the earth itself is alive. We know that the earth has got many living things, flowers and trees and human beings and animals. So if the earth is a source of life, it's very easy for me to believe that the source of life is even more alive than lots of things are. And because of this I would say it's true that, when a person dies, they put his body into a grave and his body will rot away. But this does not mean that he's finished, because just as his body goes back to the source of matter, so does his spirit go back to the source of the spiritual. Because of this, I have this belief that death is nothing but a form of change. The life changes its form, but it goes into a different kind of life.

TZ: There are many writers, and people who want to be writers, who read our magazine. How much time do you yourself devote to writing?

Singer: I was writing just now. I write every day, not one but two or three hours a day, because I'm not so young

*Dr. Joseph Banks Rhine, author of *Extra-Sensory Perception* (1935), conducted a series of famous experiments on paranormal powers at Duke University in the 1930s. His findings are now largely discredited.—Ed.



anymore. But I still do my work. I write, and then I rewrite. I have more time to do work here [in Florida] than I have in New York. Here I have, once in a while, an interview; there the interviews never stop.

TZ: What are you working on now?

Singer: At this moment I'm writing a story. By the way, I have a story in the January [1983] number of *Playboy*, a story by the name "Why Heisherik Was Born." It has nothing to do with the *Playboy* type of topic; it's a very serious story. And I sold them another story which may come out a few months later. They publish good literature there.

TZ: I know, I read "Heisherik" and enjoyed it very much. I also read it in Yiddish, when it was in the *Yiddish Daily Forward*, I believe. And I think there were some changes.

Singer: Oh, when I translate, I make many changes. Because I don't use translation just for *translation*. While I translate, I get new ideas, and I write it down.

TZ: So in other words you're really doing a kind of rewrite when you translate from Yiddish to English.

Singer: Not always completely. Some-

times more, sometimes less. But of course, if while I work I get a new idea and I think it would be good for the story, I certainly will not put it away because I think that my first version is the holy of holies! Listen, it's my material—I can do with it whatever I please.

TZ: This is going to give the scholars a good deal of work to do.

Singer: Well, if they like to dwell on these things, they are completely free to do it.

TZ: Tell me, how has the Nobel Prize changed your life?

Singer: You see, I will tell you. It didn't change my life or my convictions. I am the same man. But of course, it has changed the relation of other people to me. I walk on the street, people stop me and they give me compliments and ask me for autographs. I have got myself, today, a certain type of popularity. But basically I'm very much the same man. I'm far from changing just because someone gave me a prize.

TZ: You're now nearly eighty. We know the liabilities of age, but what are the advantages? Wisdom?

Singer: Well, I don't know how to tell

you. I'm not going to boast about wisdom, or anything else. I would say I really feel that I'm the same man as I was fifty years ago. No basic changes.

TZ: Many of your stories have in them an element of terror. Is there anything that has always terrified you personally?

Singer: Well, I will tell you. Life is a very terrifying business. We are never sure about our health, about what will happen to us. I have lived through two world wars and some other wars, so I know what life is. Terror, for me, is not some events which I have invented or others have invented. It is there all the time—say, when you buy the daily newspaper. I read here the *Miami Herald*, and believe me, it has more terror than you find in all my stories.

TZ: What brings you personal joy? Is it writing every day? Meeting people?

Singer: My work, and taking walks—I take big walks, I walk every day, between five and six miles, sometimes a bit more—and, well, that and other things. Although I'm not a young man anymore, I also know what love is and is not. I would say—this is again the same thing—reading a good book also brings joy. **17**

Hanka

by Isaac Bashevis Singer

IN WHICH THE AUTHOR EMBARKS ON A LATIN AMERICAN LECTURE TOUR—AND FINDS HIMSELF JOURNEYING THROUGH THE LAND OF THE DEAD.

This trip made little sense from the start. First, it didn't pay financially to leave New York and my work for two and a half months to go to Argentina for a lecture tour; second, I should have taken an airplane instead of wasting my time on a ship for eighteen days. But I had signed the contract and accepted a first-class round-trip ticket on *La Plata* from my impresario, Chazkel Poliva. That summer, the heat lasted into October. On the day I embarked, the thermometer registered ninety degrees. I was always assailed by premonitions and phobias before a trip: I would get sick; the ship would sink; some other calamity would occur. An inner voice warned me, Don't go! However, if I had made a practice of acting on these premonitions, I would not have come to America but would have perished in Nazi-occupied Poland.

As it happened, I was provided with all possible comforts. My cabin looked like a salon, with two square windows, a sofa, a desk, and pictures on the walls. The bathroom had both a tub and a shower stall. The number of passengers was small, mostly Latin Americans, and the service staff was large. In the dining room I had a special wine steward who