

The underlying plot structure of the novel, *di famile mushkat*, by I.B.Singer derives from two narrative sub-genres: the family saga and the bildungsroman. Historically, both are epic/romantic literary forms in which the element of time plays an integral role since, conventionally, both forms trace the development and/or decline of a family or an individual over an extended period of time. ~~so~~ The saga examines the rise and or fall of successive generations in a family, while the bildungsroman, which differs in scope and focus, observes the education of an individual in transition from a sheltered youth to subsequent adulthood and worldliness. Borrowing from that tradition, *di famile mushkat*, focuses on the family of an aging wealthy and powerful Reb Meshulam Moskat, his seven grown children from several marriages, their families, friends and associations in Warsaw. It also follows the arrival into Warsaw of a gifted young provincial Jew, --a disaffected heir of a noted rabbinical dynasty--who comes to the Polish capital in pursuit of secular education. The two patterns crossover in the novel via a romantic involvement between the inexperienced young man, Asa Heshel and Hadassah, a beautiful Mushkot grandchild.

① As a modernist with an ironic perspective, I.B.Singer exploits the element of time in his novel to distort and parody historically romantic forms. By limiting the span of his novel to fewer than four decades, and by ending it a few days into September 1939, he subverts all possibility that the novel can explore either an individual or family over a fairly lengthy period. For history intrudes on fiction when the Germans begin to bomb

Warsaw. Time runs out at the end, literally, in terms of the novel, and symbolically, for European Jews when the fateful <sup>9</sup>Hitler years begin. There is no further time to explore how successive generations may rise or decline in power, find or fail to find success or happiness; or how young provincials find or lose their way in the web of the city.

In truth, Singer's "saga" is then no saga at all, for it focuses on the same group of people from start to finish. In a major distortion of the genre, therefore, the dominant reiterative image is not succession, as one would expect, but repeated images of death which begin not long after the book opens with the death of the aging patriarch. What should be merely the first step in a logical progression of deaths of an older generation, followed by the rise of multiple successive generations is, in fact, merely the beginning of a long pattern of attrition that will continue throughout the novel until its abrupt end.

② Singer also develops a similar ironic distortion in the plot of the bildungsroman, for the question is not whether Asa, the idealistic provincial who thirsts for pure philosophical truths, succeeds or fails in his endeavors. The fact is that (1) he is never able to begin his education and search for truth in the city because, from the first, his goals are ironically diverted, grounded, and/or victimized by sexual entanglements, wars, social responsibilities, and, like so many others in the book, by his own psychological makeup; and (2) he returns to Warsaw to join his fate to that of Polish Jewry when the war begins.

Pulling an <sup>remarkable</sup> ~~incredible~~ number of strands of stories together,

\* Some thing happens in Yiddish it is.

Singer presents an unsentimental, detailed, and, for the most part, negative picture of a problematical Polish Jewish world, apparently self-destructing itself. The book raises many questions about the causes of cultural, religious, social and moral dissolution, ~~and, in the process,~~ however in the end, no final, firm answers are forthcoming. Instead, multiple perspective are proposed through a very wide range of characters - Jewish and non-Jewish- who view the situation variously. . However, that inquiry into the subject of dissolution is ultimately subverted and parodied by Singer who turns form and structure on its head through parody, and makes the problematical quality of Jewish life in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century a moot questions, since Jewish life and culture were cut off so suddenly by outside --not inside--forces of brutality and aggression<sup>\*</sup>. Thus whether the internal pattern of dissolution apparent in many of the early generations of the Meshulam family signify anything,-- that is, would have continued into a total dissolution of European Jewry, or might have been turned around by a later generations, - cannot be determined in the novel. The youngest generation, who in September 1939 may possess that potential, has no time to mature and develop after the Germans appear. We do not know, as a matter of fact, who --if anyone--survives in the family in Warsaw. .

Within the chapters and sub-chapters of the novel itself, Singer employs parody to highlight all manner of incongruities and disparities. In this paper, I would like to examine four scenes that illustrate his use of the technique and attempt to wrest some


meaning from it. As background for that, a summary of explanation of the novel's organization will be helpful.

The book is divided into 11 major parts according to the element of time.<sup>1</sup> Each part is further subdivided into many smaller chapters and sub-chapters. Thus parts I-IV focus on the pre-World War I year of 1912<sup>2</sup>. Singer devotes many pages and much care to a detailed, realistic exposition of major characters, multiple strands of plot, three different major settings, several smaller alternative communities, and a variety of conflicts and rivalries. One of the most interesting techniques in the book is the development of a complex of characters who hold different positions along a vast continuum of thought in the area of religion, philosophy, politics, social organization and even aesthetics. Yet this is more than a novel of ideas for Singer also explores the characters' actions to reveal psychological depths and a multiplicity of behavior patterns. As in the area of belief, similar patterns of behavior contribute to the formation of a continuum of psychological responses which result in the formation of interesting similarities and contrasts between characters.

Having provided a richly detailed background of people, groups, and settings, Singer proceeds in the rest of the book to show us the family in all its associations as time passes. Part V-

---

<sup>1</sup> In general, I have based my divisions on the English text which has only 10 parts. The Yiddish original has 11 parts.

 <sup>2</sup> Asa arrives in Warsaw two years before World War I, which gives me an approximate starting date of 1912.

VI begins two years after the opening. It is the summer of 1914, prior to the start of the World War I and follows the family, which begins to disperse, against the background of war. Asa is in the army and is involved in the Russian rout and retreat in May 1915, while the family experiences the subsequent entry of the Germans into Warsaw in midsummer 1915. Thus paralleling the end of chapter 6, though unspoken, is the final end of the book when the Germans will again re-enter Poland

*good*

Part VII,-VIII turns to events five years later, during the post-war or inter-war period of May - December 1922. Asa now almost 30, returns from Russia and makes a second entry into Warsaw. The section focuses on changes which have occurred. A third Khanuka celebration brings Koppel on a visit from America, the wedding of his daughter Shosha to a khaultz, Simon Bendel, and a new minor plot strand, life in Palestine.

Part IX takes place at another five years interval or 15 years after the beginning. Hitler is mentioned for the first time in the Yiddish text [p. 523]. The section focuses closely on a very brief period of time in December of 1927 and centers on preparations for, and aftermath of, a Khanuka Ball, the fourth and final celebration of that holiday in the book.

Part X briefly summarizes the family situation twenty years later in 1930, and then moves in closely to observe in greater detail, a reunion of the now widely dispersed family (America and Palestine) held in the spring of 1939. This homecoming carries over to September 1, when Warsaw is attacked by the Germans



and World War II begins. The English version of the novel ends here.

Part XI, which exists only in the Yiddish version of the novel, summarizes the various situations and thoughts of family members in and around Warsaw a few days after the war has begun. By employing two different endings, the author makes different statements to his Yiddish and non-Yiddish reading audience. The English version offers a bleak, pessimistic vision of human nature and its capacity for destruction. The Yiddish version, equally ~~as~~ <sup>2</sup> pessimistic about human nature, holds out a dim possibility of hope and optimism in a non-contemplative, non-self indulgent, curbed, committed life in Israel where Asa's son, David, survives, and perhaps in the United States where at least one of Leah's two "American" children survives. Somewhere between the two positions, Singer, a determined and unflinching anti-romantic modernist, balances himself very tensely.

very  
fine  
formulation

++++

Within the chapters and sub-chapters, the passing of time is most commonly noted by reference to Jewish holidays itself an ironic statement for a seemingly increasingly disintegrating culture that finds Judaism a burden. Secular dates, and newspaper clippings also appear in the text and help the reader to remain oriented in time. Since the Jewish holidays repeat themselves in annual cycles, they serve not only denote time but also as a convenient point of reference and comparison between earlier and later periods. All manner of changes both within the family and outside in the world can thus be easily selected and

foregrounded, e.g. Rosh Hasonnah in 1914 with the same holiday in 1939; Purim 1913 and 1915;

In this paper I will compare four Khanuka celebrations . Two occur in pre-war 1912: (1) in Reb Meshulam's home,[ Part 1, chapter 4:1,2,3,4 ] and (2) at the Bialodrevna rabbis's court [chapter 5:1,2 ] The third occurs in December 1922 in the home of Koppel's first wife, Bashele [Part 8:3-1 The fourth centers around a public Khanuka Ball held in 1927 [Part 9, chapters 1-9 ]

+++

### 1. Warsaw- 1912

The annual Khanuka celebration at Reb Meshulam's home in introduces the wealthy octogenarian's children and step-children from his three marriages. It has been established in the preceding sections that the powerful head of this family is a calculating, single minded person who is determined to have his own way. He is anything but a model Jewish parent and community member, and if one wishes to trace the sources of dissolution in the family, it clearly begins with the patriarch who is depicted as an unsympathetic character with little respect for people who makes no secret of his negative feelings. People fear and curse him, but he remains indifferent to their opinion . He neither participates in community affairs, or is ungriving of his time or money, and goes his own strange ways. A religious man, he gives allegiance to the poor Chassidic court in Bialodrevna rather than to wealthier, more popular rabbis in the region. He takes advice from no one seemingly, but in fact listens carefully to his bailiff

*Should you ever publish this paper, you should introduce your analogy to King Lear.*

Koppel, about whom much is whispered and suspected but little is known.

Reb Meshulman is a psychologically oppressive husband and father who made the lives of his wives and children miserable. All his children are a disappointment to him. Except for his son-in-law, Moshe Gabriel, who is a learned man and devoted follower of the Bialddrevna Chassidic reb, Meshulam has no kind thoughts for anyone in his family.

He knows that his most recent marriage was a serious blunder, but he is determined to cover this up, for he wishes to be thought of as still the same shrewd operator who is always "the victor in every encounter, not only against external enemies, but over his own weaknesses as well." (p. 20) Thus, from the start, in portraying the patriarch of the family, Singer delineates the dual line of development which his novel will take. On the one hand, it will focus on the study of human nature and the enemy/evil within <sup>a</sup> On the other hand, it will observe the effects of external enemies <sup>b</sup> /evil from without.

The Khanukah celebration in Reb Meshulam's house is observed with ostentation but without love or warmth.

nice

Overcompensation is sensed in a conspicuously oversized Khanuka lamp which is lit with conspicuously imported oil from Palestine. After a perfunctory distribution of presents to everyone, even the servants, the old man withdraws in distaste from his children to play with grandchildren. A noisy decorum, much gossiping, laughter, and eating fills the room. The men play



cards for small sums, while the women sit separately and play a lottery game.

✓ Singer describes all of the seven Mushkat children and their spouses in terms of excesses or deficiencies, illnesses and bad habits, or grotesque appearance. So Joel the oldest, an offspring from Meshulam's first family, and in his late fifties, is too large. His wife, Queen Esther, is also of amazon proportions and eats without cessation. A tapeworm is blamed. Joel's brother Nathan is too round, too soft, too feminine, and diabetic. His wife Saltsha functions as his nurse and medicates him continuously. Pearl, their recently widowed sister, --a good business woman we are told (high praise), sits alone to one side with her own children. She plays no role in the novel. Hama, the youngest of the four, is married to the ever absent Abram, a flamboyant rogue others either love or hate, who dabbles in many Warsaw counter culture groups and who is continuously unfaithful to his wife. In her early fifties, Hama always looks like a pauper and is continuously depressed.

The oldest child from Meshulam's second wife is Pinnie. He is dwarfed by Joel, has a yellow-green beard, and is a bad card player. His wife, Hannah, watches him closely hoping to intercept and prevent the continuous blunders he makes. His sister Leah is in her early forties and sits apart from the other matrons, choosing to gossip with her neices, the unmarried young women. Years earlier she created a scandal by falling in love with the socially unacceptable, Koppel. Her father quickly married her off against her will to Moyshe Gabriel, with whom she has since

continued to live in constant strife. Ironically, Koppel, though only an employee, is by temperament and business acumen, Meshulam's equal and rightful heir. By hook and by crook, he will take over that role as head of the family when the old man dies and will work to right what he perceives as all previous wrongs against him.

Nyunie, the youngest in the second family, makes frequent mistakes, sweats too much, and picks on Pinnie to compensate for deep feelings of inadequacy. He is a closet Western secularist and is impatient to abandon the khasidic ways and garb of his father. His wife Dacha has reared their daughter, Hadassah, who is conspicuously absent from the party, in the modern manner. Hadassah's closest friend is a Polish girl. Hadassah is more at home in K<sup>lony's</sup> gentile family than in her own.. Much of the story will pivot on Hadassah, who will replay Leah's scandal with interesting variations available to her one (more assimilated) generation later. Even more interesting, Leah will also replay her own role, by marrying Koppel after her father dies. Also absent from the party, is Leah's daughter Masha, a very assimilated young woman who will marry a gentile.

good  
point

Rosa Frumetl, Meshulam's recent third wife, though penniless, has pretensions toward learning and elegance. She busies herself as hostess, while her assimilated university educated daughter, Adele, sits alone in disdainful isolation in her bedroom.

As the evening passes, Meshulam grows angrier with himself and his children. The blunder he made when he married for a third

time festers within, and he fears that he permitted himself to be manipulated by Koppel in the matter. He sees that he has just been outmaneuvered in a game of chess by Pinnie. To top everything, his evening is intruded upon by Asa Heshel, who significantly forgetting that it is Khanuka, comes to inspect a manuscript of Rosa Frumetls' first husband which he has been hired to work on. Hadassah has been tutoring the young man in Polish, and her grandfather is uneasy about her and her modern leanings. He senses that plans he has made for her marriage to a young khosid are being undermined by Abram and Dacha. As the evening passes he resolves to force Hadassah into the arranged marriage, and to crush all opposition. Thus, as in TDM, the subject of romance and arranged marriages is the symbolic catalyst for subsequent upheavals in the social and cultural fabric of family and the Jewish world. While Sholem Rabinovitch treats the subject ultimately as comedy moderated by an infusion of irony, tragedy, and romance, Singer—two generations later—employs only tragic irony, a mode of literature in which, usually, little if any sense of the world can be made.

In an adjoining room, Adele engages Asa Heshel ostensibly in conversation about her father's manuscript. Actually she is also romantically interested in him. He reminds her of her father and she sees a potential for growth in him. Though she knows he loves Hadassah, she deceives herself into thinking that she can better satisfy his needs, so aggressively and directly, she attempts to take him in hand. Repeating a theme already raised in connection

with Meshulam, she will manipulate him into a disastrous marriage with herself, which will bring unhappiness to the entire family.

So ends the first Khanuaka scene in the book. Clearly there is nothing spiritually nourishing in the family's observance of the holiday or in their comportment with one another. The family situation can be compared to a time bomb waiting to explode when Reb Meshulam releases his oppressive hold on everyone and dies.

## 2. Khanuka. Court of the Bialodrevna rabbi -several days later

In this setting, one might expect a more religious and perhaps spirited celebration of the holiday.. However, paralleling the problems in the Meshulam household, the Khasidish Court of the Bialodrevna rabbi has also been in a state of decline ever since the rabbi's daughter, Gina, left her very religious husband and took up with Hertz Yanover, a heretic. As in the outside world, love and romance function destructively in the religious enclaves also. The rabbi has secluded himself because he feels responsible for his daughter's sins. In an inverse mirror image or reversal of the problem of manipulation, he believes that since he failed to lead his own child in the path of righteousness, he must not try lead or influence his followers. The rabbi's sense of powerlessness also parallels Meshulam's declining powers, although his response to the problem, i.e. seclusion, is the opposite of Meshulam's aggressive stand. The rabbi is a man of principal and integrity and is presented sympathetically. However he joins many others in in

good



the book who feel oppressed by the yoke of responsibility and seek some form escape.

In the privacy of his study, alone before the Ark of the Law , the scrolls ,and the Unutterable Name of God, he believes that he is able to find personal refuge and safety from evil. However, while in general Singer has greater sympathy for his religious characters than for the secular, there is a suggestion of the superstitious clinging to magic icons of faith in the scene, such as also will be found in the Hertz Yanover group which is involved in an alternative belief system that centers on seances and spiritualism. Both are part of another wide continuum of characters who are confounded by the problem of evil and search for redemption or refuge or escape from destruction either in the Messiah or in other messianic/magic hopes/belief systems

Continuing to confound our expectations, in this section Singer describes no scenes of khasidic spiritual fervor or faith. The ritual lighting of candles is observed quietly and somberly, and the rabbi, who came late to his assembled group of disciples, withdraws early before the common meal is over. Indeed, it is apparent that Meshulam has not really come to celebrate the holiday but is eager to use the rabbi in order to settle Hadassah's wedding. The rabbi expresses reservations about forcing an unwanted marriage upon Hadassah, for he believes that decision was the mistake he made with his own daughter. Meshulam is resolved to have his way, however. He is superstitiously convinced that he owes his long life to continuous struggle and victory. Were he to lose even one battle, he fears that death



would follow. Whatever reservations the Rabbi of Bialodrevna may express about the marriage, in the end we must assume that he accedes to Meshulam's wishes because a later scene reveals that arrangements for the wedding were settled. Both scenes function, then, to parody the Jewish holiday which celebrates religious freedom. In Meshulam's home, everyone is oppressed by the old man, while in the rabbi's court Hadassah is robbed of the freedom to choose her own husband.

or a parody  
of חנוכה as  
the great  
family  
celebration

By the end of part 4, a cornered Hadassah will avoid the arranged marriage by running away with Asa. As he feared, when Meshulam loses that battle, he becomes ill and soon dies. The young couple are arrested at the border, jailed separately, and Hadassah is returned home, ill. When she recovers and is safe from her dead grandfather's reach, ironically she will accept the marriage he arranged for her. For in another act of manipulation, Asa's letters to Hadassah have been intercepted. In despair at not having heard from him, as a form of suicide, she accepts the arranged marriage to Fishl.

The passive Asa, like the Bialodrevna's daughter Gina, is a "spoiled" (p. 87) child of a great Khasidic line. His family --the third major setting in the book, --is described in detail and paralleling the first two settings, it is also in decline. Like Gina and Hadassah, Asa will soon be forced/manipulated into marriage by Adele, who, ironically, like many in the older generation whom she dislikes, thinks she understands what a foolish young person like Asa really needs.

The manipulation of one character by another occurs frequently in the novel and is connected to the larger problem of free will that occupies the thoughts of Asa and the rabbis. The point is often made in the book that man has free will and can choose good over evil. However, if free will does indeed exist, and this is never determined in the novel, Singer shows us that manipulation, like that other demon, unconscious psychological drives, robs men of the opportunity to exercise their own free will.

### 3. December 1922 Khanuka at Bashele's house.

Three-fourths of the way through the book, Poland has become an independent country and theoretically a democracy. The rebirth of Poland was accompanied by much anti-semitism against Jews who were thought of as anti-Polish and pro-Bolshevik. Much radicalization of Jewish politics and the rise of nationalism occurred at this time and is reflected in the text.

The Khanuka celebration at Bashele's --Koppel's first wife whom he divorced in order to marry Leah--is a small, plain family affair centered on lighting the lamp and eating latkes. Bashele has accepted her lot, married a coal dealer, and continued to raise her family. Shosha, the oldest daughter, is engaged to marry a young khalutsnik and both plan to emigrate to Palestine. An entirely new small strand --the khalutsim- is introduced and is given sympathetic treatment by the author who appears to hold out a slim measure of hope for the survival of Jewish culture in Palestine. As a group, the khalutsniks find themselves attacked

\* I would argue that they are exactly analogous. Singer views the Bratslav Hasidim as radical activists in their own right.

on all sides by the Bund, the Zionist, the Communists, and the Orthodox, but they remain indifferent to outside criticism.

Activists, they have taken matters into their own hands and not waiting for the Messiah to come and save them. In the religious continuum, they stand at the farthest remove from the fervent Bratslaver Dead <sup>Hasidim</sup> ~~Hasids~~ who dance in a frenzy as they momentarily await the Messiah.\*

Koppel returns unexpectedly on Khanuka to his former home. He resides in America now, with Leah and her two children, and has come back to Warsaw for his first visit in 6 years. His return now foreshadows a final visit he will make in 1939.

Much has changed for Koppel and for everyone else. His marriage to Leah has brought neither of them happiness. He makes a big show of his financial success in America and turns to his lower class friends, the Oxenburgs, with whom he feels comfortable. A compulsive womanizer, he begins an affair with the older daughter of the Oxenburg family after Manya, Reb Meshulam's former maid, turns him down.

Marriage has also not brought happiness to others. Hadassah and Asa are now wed, but Asa is still discontented and confused, still pondering the eternal questions. Masha, Leah's daughter has converted and married a Pole. She has turned her back on her Jewish origins and stands at one end of a continuum that is played out in great variety and to different degrees by many others also interested in denying their past.

Of Leah's "American" children, the youngest, Mindy (Meyerl) has assimilated into American culture and will become a

successful Wall Street Lawyer, married, with children. He will not return with his mother in 1939 at the close of the book, and therefore, his physical survival is assured. His cultural/spiritual survival is unknown. At best, he represents the possibility of continuity of assimilated Judaism, a position not favored by Singer. His older sister, Lottie, (Zlate) will become a college instructor and remain unmarried. She will return with Leah in 1939. Whether she, Leah, and Masha will be able to leave for America once the war starts as they hope, is not known.

In a replay on the theme of family succession that we saw in the Meshulam family, Moshe Gabriel, Leah's first husband and her children's father, refuses to assume leadership of the Bialodrevne Khasids when the old rabbi dies, for like him, he feels he cannot lead since he too failed to properly educate three of his four children. However, in an interesting development that holds out a slim hope for survival and development, his son, Aaron, will take over that role successfully and will move the group to Palestine. However, he also will be in Warsaw when war begins and whether he returns to Palestine is unknown.

Hadassah's father Nyunie has remarried and burning his bridges like Masha, though not to the same extent, he has thrown off the oppressive yoke of his Khasidic past in favor of Western dress, Western books, Western cultural assimilation, and a new wife.

Ten years after the beginning of the story, in 1922, of the men in the older generation, Pinnie, Abram, and Moyshe Gabriel remain firmly identified as Khasids, as does Aaron and Fishl, the

new "head " of the Meshulam family in the second generation. All the rest--men and women alike--are assimilated or indifferently attached to Jewish practices and belief along a curb which will take a sharp change in direction back towards the center at the end of the book, with the celebration of Rosh Hashonnah in Warsaw on September 2, 1939. Only Asa, in a display of intellectual integrity that appears to have the author's sympathy, will refuse to turn to God after having ignored Him for so long. good

What is parodied in this section? The whole use of genre. As a saga, we are now three-quarters of the way through the book, yet it is only ten years after the beginning. What manner of saga is that? In terms of growth , development and the definition of some basic truths, absolutely nothing has happened to Asa . He remains as he was from the first: endlessly ruminating and mired in relationships that he is either driven into by emotional needs or manipulated to enter because of a passive temperament. The man who thinks more about free will more than anyone else in the book, ironically can never really exercise it .Adele hoped to save him (from himself, of course) by teaching him self-discipline, but she was doomed to failure for teachings were tantamount to telling a diabetic to excercise will power so as to control a malfunctioning pancreas. .

#### 4. Khanuka Ball, 1927 - Fifteen years later. Part 9:1-9.

The most grotesque parody occurs in 1927 at a public celebration of Khanuka where if religious candles are lit, no mention is made of the fact .On the other hand, many are lighting ✓



their own candles at both ends and (like the Bratslaver khosids) engaged in another kind of frenzied dance. Set against the first mention in the book (in Yiddish) of the rise of Hitler, every occurrence reverberates with symbolism to reveal bankrupt lives. Celebrated as a public dance and spectacle—no less than a beauty contest and a strong-man show—and cut off from all religious associations, this secular Hanukkah event smacks of bacchanalia, demonic midnight reversals, the abrogation of all moral, social, personal restraints and responsibilities. Many strands in the story come together in this section which is dominated by a mood of breakdown, masks, mistaken identities, and a desperate longing to escape from the burdens of life. Long held relationships are exchanged for new alliances that promise adventure and release. Real as well as symbolic death informs the entire section and the celebration represents a new high in decadence in Polish Jewish culture in twentieth century.

As in the past, Abram acts as catalyst persuading himself and others to engage in destructive adventures. He gives an eager Hadassah and a reluctant Asa tickets to the ball, and they, in turn, invite Masha, whose marriage to the Pole, Yanek, is floundering. All make feverish preparations for the evening out. For Hadassah, who almost immediately becomes separated from Asa, there is a nightmare quality to the crowded dance. The too warm room is filled with confusion, raucous laughter, loud throbbing music and garrishly costumed and masked people.

Russian generals with epaulets, Polish grandees in elegant caftans, Germans in spiked helmets, rabbis in fur hats, yeshiva students in velvet skullcaps; Sidelocks dangling below their ears. It was some time before Hadassah realised that these were merely masquerade costume. P 487

She sends Abram to find Asa; however a drunken Abram is diverted from his course by personal demons and wanders in a confused haze after an alluring woman who seems to promise sexual delights and turns out to be the lowly and unattractive Manya, who was a servant in his father's home.

Asa does not look actively for Hadassah. She is a burden he would like to escape. Thus he responds with interest to a new woman, Barbara, whom he is introduced to. At the farthest extreme of assimilation, she is a Communist Party activist, a convert from Judaism; her Jewish father has become an evangelical Christian missionary. She will pursue Asa aggressively and he, repeating his old pattern, will permit it. They will become lovers, and he will take up separate residence from Hadassah and their child.

Paralleling that new romance is Abram's last sexual affair. Abram is the seductive, larger than life, extroverted romantic character in the book. and a double of the pale, effete, introverted Asa. Self-indulgent and irresponsible, Abram hurls himself with great gusto into every opportunity for self gratification and adventure. He means well, but disappoints. He mooches, deceives, or "smuggles" through, to use Singer's favorite verb. Even as Ida, the great love of his life lies dying in

the hospital, and he tells himself that he must not abandon her on the night of the ball, he rushes about assembling his costume in preparation of the event. In a theme played out in variation by many others who lack strong religious centers, he cannot curb his impulses and is driven self-destructively toward the wrong goals. His emotional needs contribute to the destruction of others and although he recognizes this with admirable honesty, and berates himself for his failings, he also rationalizes his excesses, because he cannot stop himself.

He awakens in Manye's bed the morning after the ball. While on the scale of false values and yikhus, he is a great social plum for her, she on the other hand, symbolizes the most abject descent of the middle class in the book, a lowering rivaled only by Leah's embarrassing marriage to Koppel. Abram suffers a heart attack in Manye's bed but with great difficulty manages to maintain the family honor by getting himself to a cab in the street where he collapses. He and Ida will both die by the end of the chapter, and Masha, who had already committed moral suicide, will attempt the real thing, unsuccessfully, the day after the ball.

As befits ironic parody, the section ends with threats of imprisonment for Asa, Barbara, Manya and actual jail for Gina's husband, Hertz Yanover, a seeker after metaphysical truths like Asa. Hertz is wrongfully jailed for two weeks and rescued finally through the political intervention of Masha's reluctant gentile husband, an official in the Polish Army, who will soon leave her. A chilling conversation takes place as Hertz is finally freed from incarceration. A seemingly dispassionate and very courteous

Polish policeman tells Hertz that the overpopulation of the Jewish race in Poland, and in other countries as well, is a problem for Poland. As is also the too strong identification of Jews with the Communist Party, and the failure of Zionism. Hertz points out that Polish Jews are in a helpless situation both outside world and within the world of Jewry. "If the peoples of the world want us to live, then they have to discover the way," says Hertz. The polite official replies, "Time solves all problems. One way or another, Adieu."

The conversation restores priorities. While Hertz is freed now, there will be no escape later. Regardless of internal problems ( or possible solutions) outside destruction is a guaranteed certainty. ✓

++++

There is no avoiding the fact that the reality of the Holocaust informs the book from start to finish. And that a basic, ironic tension exists between carefully chosen older literary forms, the saga and the bildungsroman, which possess the luxury of unlimited time,-- juxtaposed with modern historical content, the limited years of European Jewry in the 20th century. In *di familye mushkat*, Singer, the anti-romantic ironist, masterfully exploits that disparity and in doing so makes the statement (again) that romance and myth, which pre-occupied Yiddish literature in the past, are no longer adequate forms in the twentieth century to express content, which, for modern Jews must always be seen against the background of two World Wars and the Holocaust. In an age of irony and victimization, of ✓

mindless brutality, and nightmare existence, lacking centers of certainty, faith, even reference, --old forms can only be used ironically, parodically to foreground their obsolescence. Symbolic parody and symbolic destruction of conventional literary forms is I.B. Singer's response to the Holocaust.

I think we're on to something: a wholly new and refined understanding of Singer! I already xeroxed this one myself.

(A)