I.B. SINGER

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'PORTRAIT OF A 20TH-CENTURY JEW,' ABE FRAJNDLICH

Deconstructing Bashevis

In Search of Singer's Last Words

By ILAN STAVANS

Addicts, everyone knows, are difficult to satisfy: They don't want more of the same, but they are ready to test limits, to be exigent in their rewards. Since the first moment I encountered the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer — in Spanish translations in the 1970s — I have been a confessed addict. He struck me as possessed of an enviable quality — the talent to make beauty out of vanishing memories — and he was prolific enough to keep my addiction satisfied. Singer produced an embarrassment of riches; his "Collected Stories" alone, published in 1982, is an unparalleled achievement. But as is to be expected from someone who left us dozens of novels, hundreds of stories and several autobiographical volumes, certain samples are also derivative, second rate, even rushed. Still, my addiction remained sustained, and dangerous: I read *everything* by and about Singer that I could find.

In early 2001, I gave a lecture on him at The Mercantile Library of New York. After the event, Max Rudin, publisher of The Library of America, gave me an inviting proposition: Would I be interested in editing a three-volume set of Singer's collected stories? It was to be accompanied by what became known as the "Album," a photographic tribute to Singer's work, with appreciations by other writers. A Mexican *shmendrik* like me didn't think twice. With the support and encouragement of Robert Lescher, Singer's agent, I began my research.

I never meant to embark on a full-fledged biography but, in retrospect, I accumulated enough information to produce a massive one. I went beyond Singer's visible legacy and focused my attention on his archives. It is known that Singer, who had been suffering increasing from senile dementia, spent the days before his death — at the age of 87, on July 24, 1991 — in his apartment in Surfside, Fla., in a state of obfuscation, even paranoia. Alma, his wife, remained loyal until the end, and eventually a reunion occurred with the estranged children from her first marriage, from whom Singer had kept her away. Eager to give away Singer's papers, Alma entertained a number of offers, finally settling on the Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. Through several phone conversations, I found out that Singer paraphernalia could be found at, among other places, Florida Atlantic University, Miami Dade Community College, YIVO and the archives of the Jewish Daily Forward. But the majority of the material was at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin.

In January 2003, I set out for Texas, in search of Singer's last word.

What I found were 60-plus boxes of Singer material that had been patiently catalogued for more than a decade by capable archivists. I couldn't have been more excited. Here were photographs, clippings, correspondence, passports, manuscripts, proofs, diplomas, checks, editions in multiple languages, etc., from an author I loved and admired. I found little about

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Ilan Stavans is the Lewis-Sebring professor in Latin American and Latino culture at Amherst College. He edited the three-volume set of "Isaac Bashevis Singer: Collected Stories," as well as "Isaac Bashevis Singer: An Album," both published under the aegis of The Library of America. The University of Wisconsin Press recently released "Ilan Stavans: Eight Conversations" by Neal Sokol.

In Defense Of His Amorality

By JEFF SHARLET

Isaac Bashevis Singer's admirers describe him as a man of impossible paleness, "translucent" skin laced with veins the same shade of blue as his bulging eyes. They say he was small. In photographs, his right eyebrow arches and his thread-thin upper lip sneers. His ears are large and nearly pointed, elegant despite their size, and the cartilage that shapes them follows the steep angle of his cheekbones away from his skull, like batwings. Examining a picture of the man, reading the first words of his story "Blood" — *"The cabalists know that the passion for blood and the passion for flesh have the same origin"* — it's difficult to imagine how anyone could be confused about his true nature.

That is, how he could be mistaken for a lovable *alter kacker*, as he is by those who remem-

AMORALITY *Page S4* ►

Jeff Sharlet is co-author of "Killing the Buddha: A Heretic's Bible," and is working on a book about fundamentalists and "spiritual warfare" for William Morrow.

Imagination as a Group Effort

What the Singer Siblings Reveal About Creativity in Families

By DARA HORN

Among the recurring questions that I and other writers are often asked — along with, "How long did it take you to write the book?" and "Do you use a pencil or a pen?" — there is one that almost always comes up: "Is anyone else in your family a writer?"

Those who ask this question are usually wondering about the writer's parents or grandparents, assuming that creativity is something passed from one generation to the next. But while I claim no literary ancestors, I am surrounded in my family by artists in my own generation: My older sister is an accomplished journalist who is working on a novel, my younger brother is a professional animator and my younger sister's first novel is coming out this fall. When I mention this, people often exclaim, "Oh, like the Brontës!" to which I have often wished I could reply: "No, like the Singers."

With the possible exception of Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Bashevis Singer is the most widely known Yiddish writer ever to have walked the earth. What is less widely known is that two of the Nobel laureate's three siblings also were acclaimed Yiddish novelists. The eldest, Hinde Esther (published as Esther Kreitman), traced her own journeys through Western Europe in her fiction. The works of the second eldest, Israel Joshua, were so highly regarded that his younger brother adopted the pen name Bashevis ("Bathsheba's son," after his mother's name) in order to distinguish himself from the writer who continued to be the major Singer in the Yiddish-speaking literary world. Even the unpublished youngest sibling, Moyshe, left his mark on his family's artistic imagination. The story of the Singer family demonstrates that creativity does not merely run in families between generations, but within them — and why.

The Singer siblings shared a childhood that can be called inspiring only in retrospect. Born to a deeply religious yet fiercely practical mother, and a rabbi father so submerged in spiritual life that he could not be relied upon to pay the rent, the four Singer children grew up in a home immersed in both piety and poverty. The family lived in two small towns before settling in a red-light district of Warsaw, where their father's rabbinic court often presided over the neighborhood's Jewish prostitutes and other unfortunates. Hinde Esther and Israel Joshua both fell in love with the modern world beyond their home, striking out on their own in dramatic ways. When the family later moved back to their mother's remote native shtetl, Moyshe, the youngest, fell in love with the town's pre-modern world, much as his siblings had fallen in love with Warsaw's modern one; he joined the intensely spiritual Bratslaver sect of chasidim and became a rabbi. Isaac, the second youngest, absorbed both worlds, his imagination caught between the two.

The intense alliance within the younger generation of the family, largely against their parents, drove the older three toward art. Israel Joshua, the most independent-minded of the four, brought home books for his older sister, and Hinde Esther soon became a passionate reader of secular literature, yearning for the romance and excitement that seemed just out of reach on the wealthier streets of Warsaw. Her father overlooked her because she was a girl; she and her mother were so mismatched that they argued constantly. Her rivalry with her brother Israel Joshua became almost as intense. But her dreams collapsed when the family's poverty forced her to acquiesce to an arranged marriage with the son of an Antwerp diamond dealer and to leave Poland forever. (She later fled Belgium for England during World War I.) Being forced out of the family home crushed her, yet her love of the dramatic, even in real life, powered her career. It was in her

HARRY RANSOM HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTER, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

KREITMAN: Hinde Esther Kreitman (above, in 1935, a year before her debut novel, 'Deborah,' was published) felt neglected by her father because she was female.

in New York in 1944. But as it happened, the three writers' departures from Poland allowed them to avoid the slaughter of Poland's Jews in World War II. Their youngest brother Moyshe, who had passed along stories by the chasidic master Nachman of Bratslav to Isaac just as the older siblings once passed along secular ones, was not so lucky.

What is astounding about the Singers is not just the rare confluence of three novelists in one family, something a lazy biographer might attribute to "genes" (but whose genes?) or to "the times" (but which times?). What is astounding is the

'Deborah'

By Esther Singer Kreitman

The following is an excerpt from Kreitman's novel, which will be rereleased September 1 from The Feminist Press.

Next Deborah had to pay a long succession of calls on her dressmaker and tailor. They took her measure and gave her innumerable fittings. Mechanically Deborah did all they asked her to do; she no longer consulted her own wishes and had lost all her will power. So she was going to get married after all, and yet it was sheer madness! If she were to decline even now, what could her parents do to her? And even supposing no one would accept her as a nursemaid, nor yet as a servant, could she not remain as she was and cling to her home? Thus the trend of Deborah's thoughts as she stood in front of the mirror, while the dressmaker adjusted the semi-finished clothes on her living dummy, putting pins in and taking them out again, undoing seams and sewing them up again, basting and chalking and talking. Deborah lifted her arm, lowered it, rested her foot there, rested it here: she obeyed orders.

"Dear me, you will be a radiant bride, to be sure!" the dressmaker hissed her flattery at Deborah from between clenched teeth, for she had a pin in her mouth.

"So I'm going to be radiant, am I?" said Deborah, with only a hazy notion as to why she had spoken.

"Bless your little soul, of course you will! Now just have a good look at yourself in that mirror. Why, you look like a born princess. Honestly, a queen at her best couldn't look any prettier. I hear you're going to settle in Germany. Am I right?"

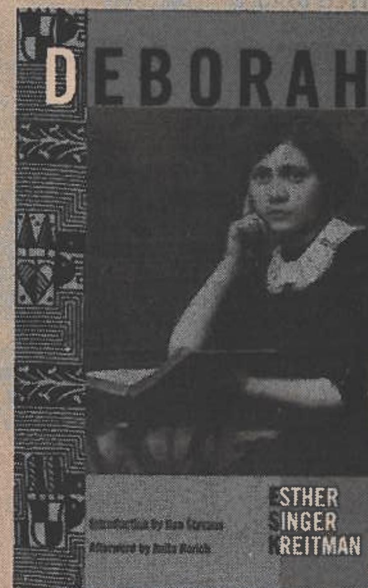
"Belgium!" Deborah corrected her.

"Go on! Isn't Belgium somewhere in Germany?"

"No, of course it isn't." Deborah smiled.

There was nothing to smile at, as far as the dressmaker could see. One was entitled to ask a question and receive a polite answer. All the same, it was not policy to argue the point with a client.

"Surprising your parents should let you go that far," the dressmaker resumed, taking the pin out of her mouth.



Deborah was silent. All at once she felt she was going to tear off the half-finished frock, dash it to the ground, and herself fall to the ground weeping and tearing her hair. She forced back a tear which sparkled in a corner of her eye for a fleeting instant, and then she turned her right shoulder towards the mirror (as requested by the dressmaker).

"Must be a love match, that's what it is," the dressmaker went on, trying to draw her client into conversation. Finding that she could get no information, she formed her own conclusions. "Nowadays parents have absolutely no control over their children. I hope you won't think I've been putting my nose in where it's not wanted, only knowing your father was a Rabbi, it seemed rather funny he should allow you to go away and live in Germany."

"Shut up and go to hell! Fool, idiot!" Deborah fumed in her thoughts. "Please hurry up!" she said aloud, by way of reply.

The dressmaker said not another word, but she was most curious to know how the lovers had first met; she was simply burning with anxiety to find out. Some girls had all the luck. Here was a slip of a girl, there was not much to her, really, and yet she had her love affair and was going abroad to marry him. Probably he was of the passionate type. Some girls had all the luck.

Antwerp diamond dealer and to leave Holland forever. (She later fled Belgium for England during World War I.) Being forced out of the family home crushed her, yet her love of the dramatic, even in real life, powered her career. It was in her letters to her bridegroom before the wedding that, as her brother Isaac would later claim, "the first literary spark in our family became apparent." The daily shames of her childhood and her traumatic departure for Western Europe became the basis of her first novel, "The Demons' Dance" (translated as "Deborah"), a thinly veiled autobiography that captures the suffocating situation of a young Jewish woman with devastating honesty. (See the column to the right for an

ALTER KACYZNE/FORWARD ASSOCIATION

I.J. SINGER: Singer's older brother, Israel Joshua, was perceived by many readers to have possessed a far more searing and powerful talent than that of the Nobel laureate.

excerpt of "Deborah," which will be rereleased this summer by The Feminist Press.)

As a son rather than a daughter, Israel Joshua had more options. Constantly bringing his impious opinions home, he enraged his parents while inspiring his siblings — particularly Isaac, who adored him, and Hinde Esther, who envied him. He took it upon himself to educate his entire family about the virtues of literature, and because of Israel Joshua's passion, Isaac later said, "I decided to become a writer." Their parents were less impressed, and Israel Joshua's fights with his father became so severe that he left home. He was forced to return for army conscription in World War I, only to desert. His family located him years later in an artist's studio, where his visiting brother, Isaac, was stunned to see the possibilities of art and secular life. As World War I raged, Israel Joshua remained in Warsaw, eventually founding a literary journal and becoming a correspondent for the paper you now hold in your hands — a job he later was able to share with his brother Isaac. It was the Forward that provided Israel's ticket out of Europe, and his brother Isaac followed in 1935, just missing the chance to see his own first novel, "Satan in Goray," appear in print. The previous year, Israel Joshua — who was a far more searing and powerful talent than his brother in many ways, and was respected by his Yiddish readers as such — published his epic masterpiece "The Brothers Ashkenazi." His career still was flourishing at the time of his early death confluence of three novelists in one family, something a lazy biographer might attribute to "genes" (but whose genes?), or to "the times" (but which times?). What is astounding is the degree to which their success and even their existence as artists depended on their relationships with one another, both as children and as adults. It is tempting to believe the tired idea that artists must be products of traumatic childhoods, and to attribute the Singers' success merely to the circumstances that made their family life a microcosm of modern Jewish upheaval. But fortunately, severe hardship is merely an optional part of artistic development. What is not optional is having peers whose critical support for you is as unconscious as it is unconditional — people who can insult your work without questioning your talent; people whose mark on your imagination is made indelible not by a single touch, but by years of minuscule impressions burned forever into your brain; people who, unlike parents or teachers, have known you as a friend; people who, unlike lovers or friends, have known you as a child; people who hopefully will grow old along with you; people who will never, ever wonder who you are. That is what brothers and sisters can do.

Like everything else in life, creativity begins at home. A surprising number of Yiddish writers (though not the Singer siblings) have claimed that when they were growing up, members of their families often spoke to each other in rhyme. When I once questioned how this could actually be true, my teacher, who had heard about my family, said, "You're the last person I'd expect to doubt it. It happens right in your own house!" She was right. While our own talents are far more modest, my siblings and I write musical comedies every year with Exodus-related lyrics and perform them at family Seders. And during the rest of the year, the four of us regularly compose long poems and parodies together for every possible occasion, reciting them in our parents' honor to make them laugh. Ever since we were children, our family events always have been observed in newly written rhyme.

It is easy to blame this on our parents, who, unlike the senior Singers, actually encouraged our creativity (partly for its own sake, partly to keep us from beating each other up). But growing up in a house where your life unfolds before a jury of your peers is a powerful and underestimated influence. In such a world, imagination is a group effort — and richer for it. As a child, I became an addicted reader much as the Singers did — by imitating my older sister, whom I revered beyond words. An insatiable reader, my sister maintained a vast library in her childhood bedroom from which she would lend books to me with such discretion, authority and taste that just scanning her shelves felt like an invitation into a realm of radiance. I saw her writing feverishly in journals and began writing just as feverishly in my own. My younger sister preferred to turn life into literature; when asked to describe her day at dinnertime, she would get up on stage and perform it as a tragicomic opera, pulling in the rest of us to play supporting roles in what became the prototype of more formal performances. My brother's talent appeared just as early, and the weird creatures he created on paper were of a piece with his hilariously bizarre comments, seasoning our days with hysterical laughter, making their way into our writings and twisting our view of the world. Growing up in this house, I never had the opportunity to believe that art was the solitary enterprise of a lonely soul. Instead, creativity was something that flourished in a very Jewish way: communally, through public ritual and argument, among passionate people bound by their common past and future dreams.

Creativity does run in families, but not in the way one would expect. It doesn't merely run through children's genes, but through the home they grow up in together — through the air they breathe in unison, and through the thoughts and imaginings with which they infuse each other's souls until their souls are shared. My siblings and I are in our 20s and 30s now, and while we cannot claim the Singers' talents, we are more fortunate in another way. Without wars to scatter us, we see one another almost every day. Our apartments are filled with each other's sketches and manuscripts, and my phone is forever ringing with their ideas. As we stand just past the threshold of adulthood, on the edge of a mature life that the Singers barely had a chance to share, I know that we have been blessed with the Singers' true gift: not talent, but each other.

Dara Horn's first novel, "In the Image" (W.W. Norton), received a 2003 National Jewish Book Award.

out. Some girls had all the luck. Here was a slip of a girl, there was not much to her, really, and yet she had her love affair and was going abroad to marry him. Probably he was of the passionate type. Some girls had all the luck. Others, like herself, had no luck at all.

Deborah's reserve of patience finally gave out. As each passing day brought her closer to the impending wedding, her nerves became more and more inflamed. Now at last she began to protest, to entreat her parents to

Now at last she began to protest, to entreat her parents to break off the engagement, or at least to arrange for her to meet the man she was supposed to marry.

break off the engagement, or at least to arrange for her to meet the man she was supposed to marry.

"What's that? You want to put us to shame now that the wedding is only a few days off and all the arrangements have been made and everybody knows? Stuff and nonsense!"

At last she quieted down; she ceased tormenting herself; her strength deserted her, and she took to her bed with a nervous breakdown. The home was plunged into chaos and utter despair. Raizela stooped like an old woman as she went about her work. She fumbled all she did; everything she touched slipped through her fingers. And there was more to be done now than ever. Michael became her right hand, and he did for the remaining crockery. Reb Avram Ber walked about like a man in a dream: he was in a continual state of alarm lest Reb Baruch Laib, Deborah's prospective father-in-law, should get to know how things were.

But they succeeded in hushing the matter up (for which the Lord be praised!). The doctor, without actually saying so in as many words, led Reb Baruch Laib to believe that Deborah was indisposed with a feverish cold. After a while the doctor reached the decision that his patient's nervous disease was not to be cured by keeping her in bed. On the contrary, she must get up, take plenty of fresh air, mingle with the crowd, shun solitude of any kind, and — very important this — she must avoid dwelling on any painful thoughts which might be afflicting her; plenty of fruit was what she wanted, plenty of vegetables — and most important, said the doctor, pulling out his watch — on no account must she worry. In his opinion her indisposition was due to some trying experience, such as would leave a deep impression on a highly-strung adolescent mind. That was why she must do everything within her power to banish foreboding thoughts. Her condition did not give rise to anxiety; the illness could now be nipped in the bud; but to do so, it was essential that his advice be acted upon rigorously, and then he went on to give the most unprofessional sort of advice, the sort that left one flabbergasted, coming as it did from a medical man. . . .

Some weeks passed. Deborah regained the merest semblance of a young, healthy woman. This, therefore, was the appropriate moment to marry her off. There had been several postponements of the wedding, but the happy event could not be put off forever.

"Do you mean to say you're worrying about what the doctor said? Can't you see the man's crazy?" said Reb Zalman at the family conference, scornfully shrugging his shoulders and flinging out his hands in mock despair.

Raizela and Reb Avram Ber were both obliged to acknowledge that the doctor was as mad as a hatter. Obviously no sane man would say to a bride, who had completed all her arrangements for the wedding and had her trousseau all ready, that she must find a job as a saleslady so as to keep her mind occupied, and if the man who said such things — a doctor at that — was not sane, clearly he was insane.

"Goyim will be Goyim!" said Reb Zalman.

Again Reb Avram Ber and Raizela were both obliged to acknowledge that Goyim will be Goyim.

"Have you ever heard of such a thing? Here's a girl on the threshold of her married life, with all her life before her, and some silly fool of a doctor comes along and has the impertinence to tell her to. . . . Why, it's monstrous! Monstrous! As if we wanted his advice! A doctor's job is to give you medicine and pills," said Reb Zalman, "and if we stand in need of advice, we shall know where to get it: we'll go and consult a Tsadik!"

"You're quite right. And, please God, she will be all the better for an early marriage."

My Favorite Demon

In Singer's Work, Imps, Dybbuks and Evil Spirits Get the Last Word

By ESTHER SCHOR

Writers are famous for their demons, whether they battle alcoholism, depression or the savage pain of a rotten youth. Isaac Bashevis Singer was no exception, except that his demons were demons. Unlike many writers, he made no secret of them: "I am possessed by my demons," he declared to Commentary. Later, he made a telling comment to NBC: "Whenever I sit down to write a story, sooner or later the supernatural will come up, almost against my will."

That there are evil spirits from the Lord is a fact that Jews learn in the Bible, where such spirits fell cities and ruin kings — most notably Saul, who wasted his time banishing the necromancers. Saul's servants told him exactly Who sent an evil spirit to darken his mind, but most Jews have preferred to forget that evil spirits can come from God. (Why else, for two millennia, have we founders of monotheism been hospitable to the demons of our neighbors?) The track of our demons runs jaggedly throughout Jewish history; we've played host to Canaanite, Babylonian and Persian devils, and later, to Spanish and German imps. We let the baroque elaborations of the kabbalists erode over time into the apotropaism of Singer's chasidic forebears.

Singer well knew that to draw demons from chasidic traditions was to borrow freely from an ancient, richly syncretic culture of demonology. Thus, his demons do everything from hiding house keys to raping and slaughtering virgins. They cause sniffles and seizures, pimples and plagues; they wrangle and strangle.

Singer's demons divided his readers. With his Yiddish readers, who knew him as Bashevis, they were unpopular, at best; at worst, they were an embarrassment to the progressive, humanistic values of the Yiddishists. To the Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein, Bashevis's themes of "horror and eroticism" were *treyf*, interlarded with "superstition and shoddy mysticism." Glatstein declared Bashevis's supernaturalism alien to "the kind of [Jewish] mystic literature that exuded exaltation and sanctity," and charged that he was pandering to a non-Jewish audience. Bashevis himself recalled an editor for the Yiddish Press trying "to persuade me to be a social writer, to write about the situation of the tailors in New York, how badly they live and how they fight for their existence." In Bashevis's eyes, writing the story of the struggle to eke out a living was Sholem Aleichem's job; his own vocation lay elsewhere.

American readers were more receptive

WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY

has a heavenly point." More often, Singer's

They cause sniffles and

it expands to the cosmic instead of contracting to the psychological. Kazin shrewdly observed that Singer's fixation was not the human mind, but rather "the *mind* of God... an endlessly suprising thinker...."

If Singer's stories were parabolic, it was because he read the cosmos as God's parable. As Milton Hindus wrote of "The Spinoza of Market Street" (1961), "In the lowliest characters and the most commonplace situations he is able somehow to decipher the message that this world is governed by mysterious powers, often divine, occasionally diabolical." If evil was part of the Creation, and all the creation signified its Creator, then demons represented the Creator, too. For Singer, to explore "the mind of God" was to discover radical evil.

In a 1973 interview with Irving Howe, Singer comes closest to revealing the reason that demons possessed him. Citing "Satan in Goray," Howe ventured that Singer wrote from within "a kind of underground tradition in the Jewish experience... the tradition of false Messianism... which leads people to fanaticism, to hysteria, to disintegration, to explosion." Singer's oblique response, comparing Sabbatai Zevi to Stalin, underlies Ruth Wisse's trenchant reading of the novel as a parable of "the fatal triumph of the revolutionary impulse that can never be stopped in time." But Wisse's reading shows what's wrong with Singer's, for the Sabbataian Reb Gedaliya the Slaughterer is hardly, as Singer says of Stalin, "the man who tries to do good and comes out bad." Reb Gedaliya's success in Goray hinges on the Jews' readiness to believe that God endorses the very desires that they *know* to be evil:

> He demonstrated by means of cabala that all the laws in the Torah and the Shulchan Aruch referred to the commandment to be fruitful and multiply; and that, when the end of days was come, not only would Rabbi Gershom's ban on polygamy become null and void, but all the strict 'Thou shalt nots,' as well.... Men would be permitted to know strange women. Such encounters might even be considered a religious duty; for each time a man and a woman unite they form a mystical combination and promote a union between the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Divine Presence.

That Reb Gedaliya plays fast and loose with kabbalistic symbols, that he trumps both Torah and Talmud with the blessing in the garden — these facts are only partly the point. More important, Reb Gedaliya

morning sun, a sphere of blood. But her resistance is futile, for to possess a demon's eyes is already to be possessed.

In "Shiddah and Kuziba," Singer offers a myth of origins, an account of the fall — that is, the first ascent — of the demons into the world of humans. In this nimble, Swiftian satire, the demons we meet "nine yards inside the earth," mother and son, are innocent, uncorrupted by contact with the evil humans. Through the eyes of the maternal demon Shiddah, Singer reviles the human yahoos, whose "ideas come from a slimy matter which they carry in a bony skull on their necks. They can't even run the way animals can: Their legs are too feeble. But one thing they do possess in great measure: insolence." As Shiddah murmurs to her frightened son, "Man is the mistake of God,... an evil mixture of flesh, love, dung, and lust."

If Singer's demons are Houyhnhnms, they are *Jewish* Houyhnhnms; their lives are familiar, humble, gentle, devout. Shiddah daydreams about Kuziba growing up, marrying, giving her grandchildren: "[S]he would braid the girls' hair, clean the boys' noses, take them to Cheder, feed them, put them to sleep. Then the grandchildren themselves would grow up and be led under black canopies to marry the sons and daughters of the most reputable and well-established demons." She imagines her husband, Hurmizah, off studying at his yeshiva, becoming a great, esteemed rabbi of the underworld — perhaps eventually even "King of the Demons."

What makes Singer more stinging than Swift is his glimpse into the demonic yeshiva: "There [Hurmizah] studied the secret of silence. Because silence has many degrees.... There is a final silence, a last point so small that it is nothing, yet so mighty that worlds can be created from it. This last point is the essence of all essences.... This last silence is God."

Up in the human world, that God is silent in the face of suffering is the perennial rant of the blasphemer. As the young Chazkele asks in "The Blasphemer," "If God is merciful, why do small children die? If He loves the Jews, why do the gentiles beat them? If he is the Father of all creatures, why does He allow the cat to kill the mouse?" We hear the strident voice of blasphemy again in "The Briefcase," from the lips of Reizl, an alcoholic survivor of the camps: "He's no God. He's a devil. He's a Hitler too, and that's the bitter truth.... He sat in his seventh heaven, watching children being dragged off to gas chambers." But in the demons' yeshiva, Singer takes us beyond blasphemy; all we hear is the sublime, deafening silence of God.

Howe was right that the Jewish tradition

to Singer's demons, but only after trapping them in the elegiac amber of folklore. For readers unfamiliar with Eastern European Jews, Singer's imps, devils and spirits became the fossils of quaint customs and lost ways. Meyer Levin's 1955 review of "Satan in Goray" hailed the novel as "folk material transmuted into literature."

But a decade later, in Orville Prescott's review of "A Short Friday and Other Stories," this transmutation seemed less assured: "[T]he chief interest of some of these stories is anthropological, information about the customs and ideas of a backward and isolated community." Prescott's reading of the supernatural stories as "parable and allegory" was endorsed by other American critics who caught an oniony whiff of modernist skepticism from Singer's tales of piety. As Thomas Lask wrote of "The Seance and Other Stories," "He is really a maker of parables. The most earthly story parabolic "point" was taken to be not heavenly, but psychological, a reading that Singer was happy to endorse. Calling his own supernaturalism "spiritual stenography," Singer noted, "Devils symbolize the world for me, and by that I mean human beings and human behavior." In the 1970s, after the publication of "A Crown of Feathers," Singer's demons began to resist what Anatole Broyard referred to as their "subjugation" to the human psyche. "I tried to translate the demons into passions or obsessions, into more or less psychological terms," wrote Broyard, "but they did not lend themselves to this."

It took a scholar of American literature, Alfred Kazin, to find in Singer's supernaturalism an affinity to the works of "those other children of devout families, Hawthorne, Melville, James, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane." For these writers, as for Singer, evil is metaphysical; in their hands,

seizures, pimples and plagues; they wrangle and strangle.

knows that the irresistible appeal of Sabbataian Messianism lies in the notion that all one's evil urges — including lascivious, perverse, sadistic sexuality — are "from the Lord." Singer's Sabbataians may have been evil and self-deceived, but they were Jews who believed that the Satan who came to Goray was "from the Lord."

Singer wrestled his demons for their vision and their stories, for their truth was part of God's truth. Two stories in "The Spinoza of Market Street" — "Black Wedding" and "Shiddah and Kuziba" — show us the world as demons see it. In "Black Wedding," the demonic perspective belongs to a young bride who tries to resist possession by her demon groom. In her nuptial phantasmagoria, Hindele reveals "the way the evil ones imitate the humans in all manners." In their "good-luck dance," she sees a "bad-luck dance"; in her festooned wedding bed, a dank cave; in the in which Singer's ferocious imagination flourished was "underground." In fact, it's the tradition of the demons' yeshiva, and not only Jews study there. Augustine, Milton and Swift learned there; so did Hawthorne and Melville; Dostoevsky, too. In "The Last Demon," a Jewish demon speaks for himself, out of the ashes of the *khurbn*. Sucking the merest sustenance out of "Jewish letters," he laments: "There are no more Jews, no more demons... I am the last, a refugee." The infernal humans may have outdone the demons, but in Singer's work, the demons' story is still told, in Jewish letters.

No wonder Singer retired to Florida — for as all Talmudists know, no demon can resist a palm tree.

Esther Schor, professor of English at Princeton University, is writing a biography of Emma Lazarus for Schocken.

Hunting for the Magic

A Young Writer Attempts To Emulate a Master

By JUDY BUDNITZ

Whenever I'd ask my relatives where my great-grandparents had lived before immigrating to the United States, their answers always seemed strangely, frustratingly unspecific: A little village near Minsk, or maybe Pinsk, they would say. In the part of Russia that is now called Belarus, they thought. It may have been near a river, they conjectured. It was as if my family had come from a magical land that fogged the memory, evaded description, slid around on the map.

Which is one reason why, when I first encountered the writing of Isaac Bashevis Singer, at the age of 8 or 9, it made a deep impression on me. Singer's stories provided the details I craved. They painted a picture of potatoes and prayer, men in beards and women in kerchiefs, lives of struggle and suffering and brief bursts of happiness — a picture that, to my mind, seemed absolutely correct and appropriate. Even the bits of magic and glimpses of the supernatural seemed real and authentic to me. Things were different over there in the Old Country, I thought. That was just the way life was, back there, back then. When my family went to our synagogue, I looked at the elderly people in the congregation — the ones with heavy accents and an air of "differentness" — and I felt I knew them from Singer's stories.

Even today, I find it difficult to get this image out of my head, the image of the Singer Old Country. I can't distinguish fact from fiction, memory from my imagination's embellishment.

The first Singer stories I read, in a collection of some of the lighter, less nightmare-inducing stories, had such authority emanating from them that I immediately assumed they were nonfiction. They had the air of testimonials, of eyewitness accounts. The authenticity came not from a piling up of details and factual evidence, but from the opposite: the stories' very simplicity. The matter-of-factness of their tone was what made them seem so true, made them seem as if they could not possibly be otherwise.

No stunts, no devices, no fancy flourishes.

I came back to Singer when I was a college student. I wanted to be a writer, and I remembered the strong impression his stories had made on me. I returned to his writing, curious to see if it would intrigue me as much now that I am an adult as it had when I was a child. If so, I wanted to figure out what made it so powerful, and then steal those tools and devices to use in my own writing.

I read as many of his stories as I could find. Most were deeper, more nightmarish and disturbing than the ones I read as a kid: stories of *dybbuks*, devils, gloating imps, ghosts, people struggling against sin and temptation, old immigrants hunched over weak tea in cafeterias. I was both thrilled and perplexed by them — thrilled because they were as intense and effective to me as an adult as they'd been years ago, but perplexed because I couldn't pin down *why* they entranced me as much as they did.

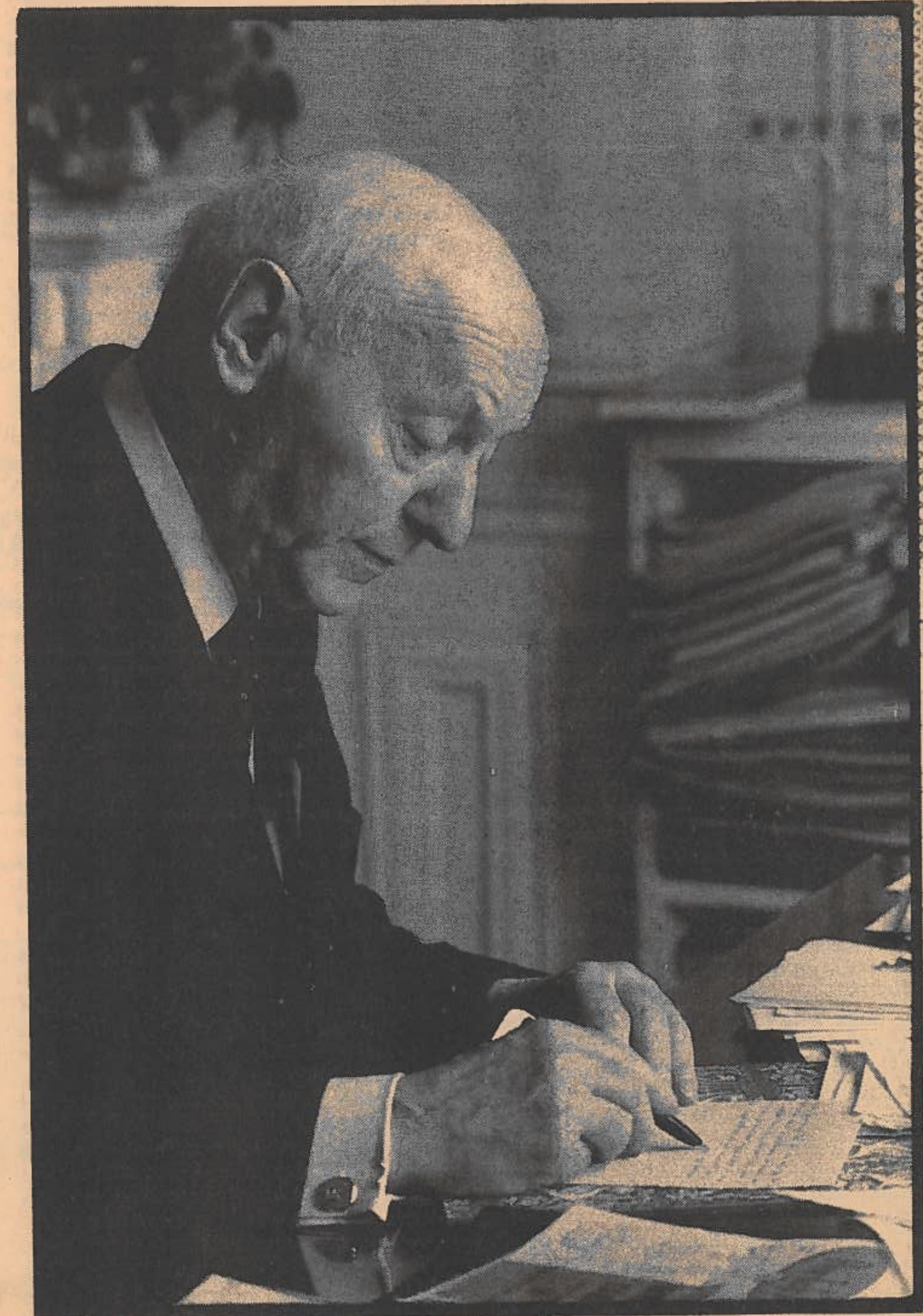
I was then in a phase in which I liked to pick apart stories, the way a watchmaker takes apart a clock. I wanted to look at all the cogs and machinery and see how they fit together, see what made them tick. And I couldn't do that with Singer's stories. They resisted dissection. You just had to swallow them whole. The stories are so simply written — no stunts, no devices, no fancy flourishes. Everything seems to be out in the open, nothing hidden. And yet I couldn't pin down which words or phrases or plot structures were the ones that made the stories sing. I couldn't pin down where the magic was.

I had tried to imitate Singer deliberately, but I simply couldn't do it. That is, until I stopped trying.

It wasn't until years later that I found myself emulating him, after all. Singerisms crept into my own writing, in ways I didn't intend and that I only noticed in retrospect, long after I'd finished writing. I wrote stories about people poised on the brink of moral choices, with dark forces swirling all around them. I didn't set out to do it, but I found myself writing an entire novel that clearly was set in a Singer world — an ominous, cold Old Country where violence and magic were daily facts of life.

MAGIC *Page S5* ►

Judy Budnitz is the author of the books "Flying Leap" and "If I Told You Once." Her new story collection, "Nice Big American Baby," will be published early next year.



THE MASTER: Even today, writes Budnitz, she finds it hard to get the image of Singer's Old Country out of her head, to distinguish fact from fiction, memory from embellishment.

PHOTO: NANCY CRAMPTON

Defending His Amorality — and Ours

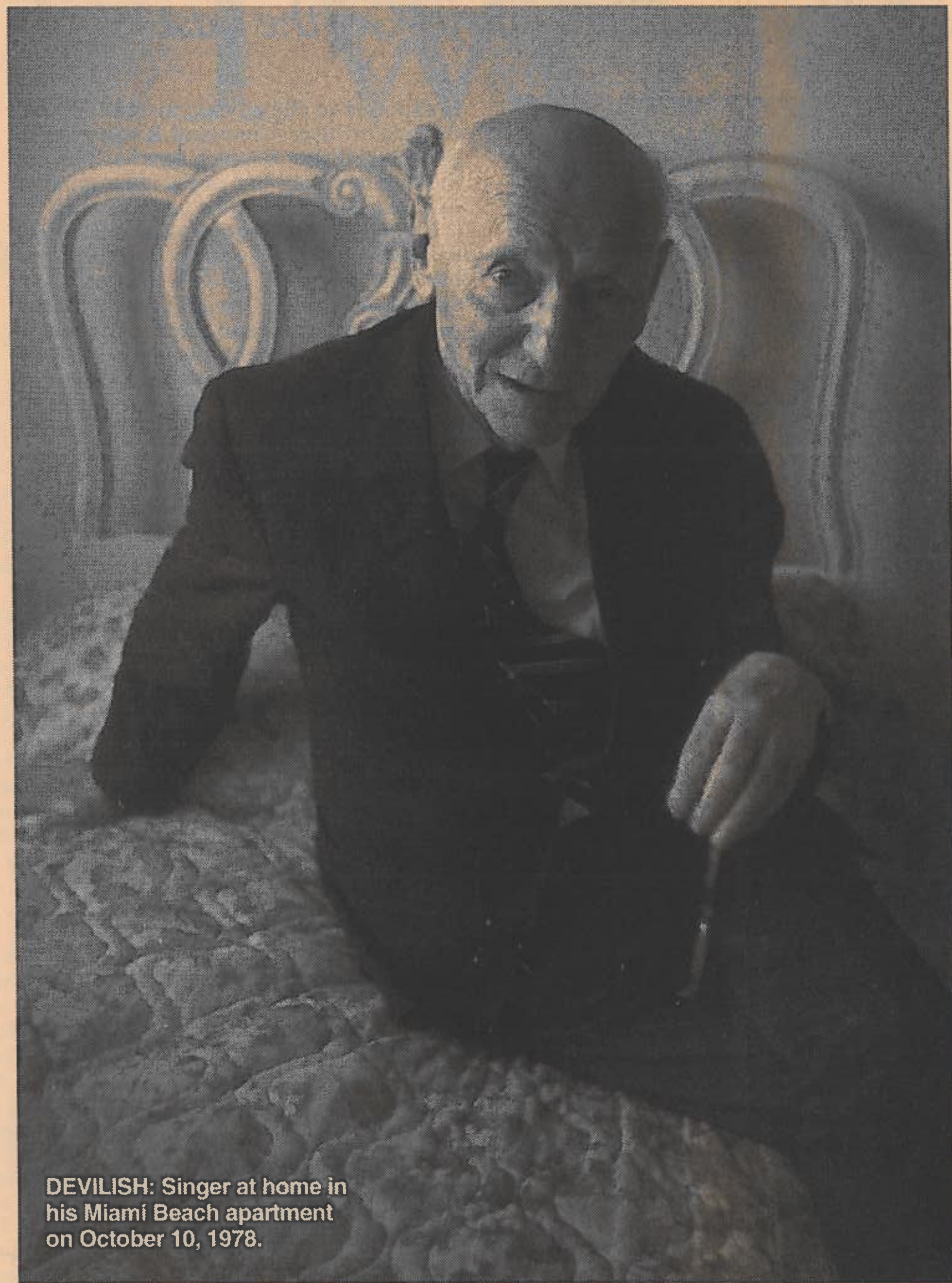
◀ AMORALITY *Page S1*
ber most his saccharine children's stories (*heymish* frauds, all). Or as a preservationist of a great heritage, as he is by those who revere the speech he gave on the occasion of winning the Nobel Prize (a self-congratulatory sermon). He was, by most accounts, a vicious man, and worse: a channeler of demons. The devils and imps and *dybukkim* with which he crowded his books play the part of metaphors, yes, but their symbolic meanings are only the rags and gabardine in which they're dressed. Beneath, they are as real as Bashevis, as real as the double-edged spike that cuts through the *aleph*, א, the empty cave at the heart of the *beyz*, ב.

The incarnation that Bashevis granted them was his gift to American letters, and for that — the flesh he gave them — we should be grateful.

The first time I read Bashevis I was 22, and I had taken a job as editor of an English-language magazine published by the National Yiddish Book Center. To prepare me, they sent a box of Yiddish literature in translation: Irving Howe's "Treasury of Yiddish Stories," Sholem Aleichem, Mendele the Book Peddler. At the bottom of the box was a copy of Singer's novel "The Slave," a story of a Jew in bondage to Polish peasants. Despite his isolation and his love for a shiksa, the main character remains true to his Judaism. Susan Sontag once remarked that "The Slave" is a book in which "God gets the last word" — a rather boring premise for a novel. Already regretting my immersion in professional Jewry, I groaned as I read Singer's hero described thusly: "Jacob of Josefov took the privations Providence had sent him without rancor." What a sanctimonious putz.

I read "The Slave" while I drove cross-country in the company of a woman with whom I'd fallen out of love. The feeling was mutual, the drive silent and long. Whenever she took the wheel, I'd read. No air conditioning, 100 degrees, we were doing 90 on a bone-bleak stretch of road in Eastern Montana. I let my arm fall into hot wind, Singer in hand. With a snap, the book tore out of my fingers. I twisted in time to see it slap against the head of a worker on a road crew, its pages in his face as if Bashevis himself were blowing the man a sloppy, Yiddish kiss in translation. Good riddance.

I wouldn't return to Bashevis again, and thus wouldn't discover the *good* parts — what the Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein described as "insanely sexual, pornographic, paranoid, freakish" — until I met some old ladies who could personally vouch for Singer's true proclivities. This occurred at a peculiar gathering convened by the Yiddish Book Center, a "conference" on the great man's work. Most of the attendees were older couples.



DEVILISH: Singer at home in his Miami Beach apartment on October 10, 1978.

AP WIDEWORLD

candy-red lips said: "I knew Isaac. We use to meet for, eh, lunch. How to describe? Isaac was, he was... a passionate man." The speaker's husband, sitting beside her, looked out the window resolutely.

Another woman spoke: "There was a time I talked to Isaac almost every day. You know, about things in our lives. We'd go for walks. He... understood things other men did not." Her husband, a dapper man in a blue blazer, stared at his desk.

A widow said: "Let's not forget: He was not a tall man, but he was *very* physical."

That night, I was haunted by demons.

His demons are as real as the perversions they inspire.

(Singer would have approved; his first serious lover in Warsaw was a consumptive twice his age.) The next day, I began reading "Satan in Goray."

From there, I flew through much of Singer's work in no reasonable order. Here was a Jewish writer who in his strength admitted no redemption, celebrated no triumphant spirit, aped no Christian moral. "Is creation a snake primeval crawling with evil?" one of his charming anti-heroes asks, taking it easy after dragging a young beauty to hell to be pickled alive for eternity. "How can I tell? I'm still only a minor devil."

It is said that Bashevis carried a list of sins in his pocket at all times. "Every sin," he wrote in his story "Taibele and Her Demon," "gives birth to devils and spirits and these are man's descendants and come to demand their inheritance." A life-long student of the mind, he nonetheless refused to reduce his demons to the status of suppressed urges. "I am of the opinion that we are surrounded by existences and forces of which we are unaware now," he told an interviewer, "but of which we shall learn in 300,000 years or never.... They may be sitting in this chair or standing and listening to our conversation."

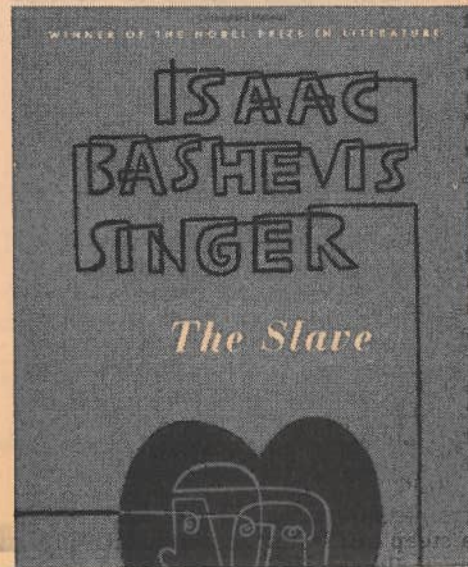
Or perhaps he was listening to theirs. In "The Last Demon," the eponymous narrator laments that "the Jews have now developed writers. Yiddish ones, Hebrew ones, and they have taken over our trade." Of course, he is being generous; modern Hebrew is too chaste for devils. The demon acknowledges as much: "I draw my sustenance from a Yiddish storybook, a leftover from the days before the great catastrophe." It is the Yiddish *aleph-beyz* that gives solace to evil, shelters the demons made invisible by responsible scholarship, by well-intentioned hagiography, by the propriety of literature that Singer craved even as he inadvertently desecrated his adopted tongue — or rather, that of his comely young translators, every one of whom, legend holds, he seduced.

America had enjoyed chroniclers of evil before this monster — Hawthorne and Poe and Faulkner — but Singer introduced a different kind of imp to American letters, urban and omnipresent, with a better sense of humor. His demons thrive not just in the dark woods and crumbling Southern mansions. They are everywhere, and they are as real as the perversions they inspire.

Scholars may suppose they are tools of psychology, good Jews may insist they are mirrors in which we can glimpse the complex mind of God. But Jewish writers are, for the most part, a "pornographic, paranoid, freakish" bunch. I am thinking here of the various Roths and Hoffmans and Grossmans and Goldbergs, not to mention pens and naysayers among whom I am proud to be numbered. We know better. Singer's demons are as real and numerous as our own lusts and envies and vanities and voyeurisms and perversions, inversions, reversions, as real and quick and clever as our pettiest deceptions, the ones we thank God for granting us, lest we run out of stories. It bears repeating: Bashevis's demons are no more a matter of literary metaphor than was the last furtive glance you cast at some desirable creature on the street. She, he — or, God help you, *it* — was real, and so was the devil leering right alongside you, the *dybbuk* possessing and filling you with fantasies most unclean and delightful. Thank you, I. B. Singer!

As I was thinking about Singer's centennial, I scanned my shelves to see what works I could call on for this essay. To my surprise, I found "The Slave." It was a used edition I must have picked up somewhere, after I threw my first copy to the wind. There was a note inside. It seems this copy had been a gift from a man to his girlfriend. He wanted her to read it so that she would understand him, his Jewishness, his grandfather's stories of the shtetl. He closed his note oddly: "As a New York cabdriver once said to me, yelling repeatedly over the traffic, 'The DEAD command us.' Read it with all my love."

The Last Demon himself could not have said it better. The dead Singer reminds us of are our *dybbukim*, spirits that possess us. They rip books from our hands and hurl them at the goyim; they transport us to grotesque reveries and inspire us to record and reproduce the sins that are the fathers and mothers of a million bastard spirits. Yiddish may be a subject for nostalgia, but its demons are alive and well in America. They live on, as Singer wrote, in the curves and crooks of the letters with which we make words to describe them. They are sitting in your chair right now, or standing beside you, reading over your shoulder. I wrote this for their pleasure.



In passing, one of the speakers, a graduate student, mentioned Singer's reputation as a womanizer. Around the room, wrinkled arms shot into the air.

An antique beauty with orange hair and

Succubuses, too many aged Liliths to count. Old women coming for me in the dark with unspeakable lusts and the smacking lips of octogenarians — red as fresh blood. What can I say? I responded.

Ginsberg, Bruce and Bukiet, Shteyngart ("filthy immigrant bear," self-named), Goldstein (just plain filthy) and Ozick (most brilliant pornographer of all), plus the legions of lesser smut writers, poison

Deconstructing Bashevis: An Aficionado Searches for Singer's Last Words

◄ STAVANS *Page S1*

Leoncin, the shtetl in which he was born, but I did come across Singer's *Carte de Presse* from 1935, from the time when he worked for *La Journée Parisienne.* I found his 1930 Yiddish translation of Erich Maria Remarque's "*Oyfn mayrev-front keyn nayes*," or "All Quiet in the Western Front." I saw photographs with his siblings Esther Kreitman and Israel Joshua Singer; his friend Aaron Zeitlin and acquaintances like Katya Molodovsky and Yosef Opatoshu; his Farrar, Straus and Giroux editor, Roger Straus, who died last month and whose wife, Dorothea, wrote a 1982 memoir of Singer called "Under the Canopy." And I came across the New York Times article about the now-corrected error in Singer's tombstone at the Beth-El Cemetery in Paramus, N.J. It originally stated: "Noble Laureate."

Noble? It wouldn't have been my first choice of adjectives. As I delved further into the boxes, I began to feel the steady assault of idol-shattering. It first came in the form of epistolary evidence of plentiful

> Noble*? It wouldn't have been my first choice of adjectives.*

romantic nights spent with mysterious women who swear their love to Singer and offer their help in translating his stories. He gladly takes their offer... and then communication ends. There were letters to and from the Jewish Daily Forward, whose famous editor-in-chief, Abraham Cahan, had little esteem for Singer's florid imagination. And correspondence from Rachel MacKenzie of The New Yorker, evidencing efforts of Singer's editors to shape his stories for an English-language audience.

Perhaps most painfully, I found a picture dated March 14, 1936, of his first wife, Runia Shapira, and their son, Israel. Runia had been denounced as a Zionist by the Soviets, spent nine months in Turkey and finally settled in Israel with her son (who later hebraicized his surname to Zamir, Hebrew for "singer.") I found an aerogramme from a 20-something Israel Zamir to his father, who by then had fostered a complicated relationship based on silences and evasions.

I don't want to go into detail about each of the revelations I came across. Some are in the "Album"; I've spoken to friends about others, and a few more I better keep to myself. I do need to confess that my discomfort swelled as my research advanced: My adolescent idol, I realized, was also habitually abusive. I learned to see Singer in a different light: resentful, petulant, self-aggrandizing and, what to me is an unforgivable sin, incapable of supporting the next generation of writers. At one point, I contemplated calling up Max Rudin and closing the door on the whole endeavor.

"Yes — writing lives is the devil," Virginia Woolf once said. I added: We hold our heroes closest to our heart after we come to recognize their limitations. If delving into a person's secret diaries is indiscreet, scrutinizing his tax receipts is utterly embarrassing. But Singer, aware of his own immortality, stored these items for the future to have — and, I thought, I guess I'm his future.

Still, I couldn't help but be mystified that Isaac Bashevis Singer, unquestionably a promising young Yiddish author but not one on whom those in-the-know before World War II would have bet, today enjoys the uncontested status of *zeyde* for American Jews. He is recognized as a bridge between the Old World and the New, as well as the torch bearer of a past incinerated at Auschwitz. But Singer left Europe in 1935 at the age of 31, and while the Holocaust indeed appears in his fiction, it does so only marginally. Moreover, he was no Mr. Lower East Side: The neighborhood of Eldridge Street and its surroundings was never his home. He spent time at the Garden Cafeteria, especially when photographer Bruce Davidson took him back to it for a photo shoot that in 1973 made its way to New York magazine, and the Folksbiene Yiddish Theatre dramatized eight episodes from "In My Father's Court." But his loci were Coney Island and the Upper West Side — Singer's apartment was at the Belnord Building on 86th Street, between Broadway and Amsterdam, known now as "Isaac Bashevis Singer Boulevard."

Then there is the mythology of Singer as the keeper-of-the-flame, the man single-handedly responsible for the endurance of Yiddish into the age of globalization. That, too, is a fallacy. The Nobel committee honored him, in the words of Lars Gyllensten, a committee member, for his effort toward Yiddish. It is "the language of the simple people and of the mothers, with its sources far back in the Middle Ages and with an influx from several different cultures with which this people had come in contact during the many centuries they had been scattered abroad." Gyllensten added: This "is Singer's language. And it is a storehouse which has gathered fairytales and anecdotes, wisdom, superstitions and memories for hundreds of years past through a history that seems to have left nothing untried in the way of adventures and afflictions."

HARRY RANSOM HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTER, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

ZAMIR: Singer had a complicated relationship with his son (above, in Israel in 1947).

In his acceptance speech, Singer replied that "there are some who call Yiddish a dead language, but so was Hebrew called for 2,000 years. It has been revived in our time in a most remarkable, almost miraculous way. Aramaic was certainly a dead language for centuries but then it brought to light the *Zohar*, a work of mysticism of sublime value. It is a fact that the classics of Yiddish literature are also the classics of the modern Hebrew literature. Yiddish has not yet said its last word."

A sanguine statement: *Yiddish has not yet said its last word*. If people feel nostalgic toward Singer's Yiddish, this is mainly because Singer knew perfectly how to capitalize on nostalgia. More than one of Singer's many Yiddish colleagues accused him of betraying his literary tradition when he decided to translate out of Yiddish. (His enemies, so the joke goes, regularly would wake up an hour earlier than usual so that they could have more time to hate Singer.) And in all truth, the reputation he amassed in his mature years is thanks to English.

Over the past year, I've fallen in love with Singer again. I realize now that what I most love about him are his contradictions. These contradictions are for everyone to ponder. Browsing through a treasure trove of critical rejoinders to his oeuvre, I've come across more than a share of hostile, even derogatory comments, including some by Robert Alter and Leon Wieseltier. He is called "a charlatan," a prankster, a "traitor to the Yiddish tradition," even "a dirty old man" whose fiction is "bad for the Jews." But there is also a plethora of accolades — from Irving Howe, Leslie Fiedler and Ted Hughes, among others, who applauded Singer's talents at different moments throughout his almost-40-year career in English. For them, he was a mythical genius and "the best writer in the United States since World War II." How did this fabulist *extraordinaire*, and the only Nobel Prize winner Yiddish might ever have, metamorphose from a *shmendrik* born at the dawn of the 20th century into an orthodox milieu of the Polish countryside into an iconic American master whose work stands side by side with that of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Stephen Crane and Dawn Powell? Perhaps he himself was the magician of Leoncin.

This year marks Singer's centennial. Numerous events sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities are planned countrywide, which should allow for plenty of opportunity to discuss these contradictions. A traveling exhibit of Singer memorabilia organized by the Ransom Center will be on display in Massachusetts, New York and Florida, and a smaller-scale version of Bruce Davidson's photographs of Singer will open at the Mead Museum of Amherst College on September 7, accompanied by a lavish catalog. A five-day conference at the National Yiddish Book Center, from July 11 to 15, will celebrate his birthday with fanfare. A show of illustrations by Margot Zemach of Singer's children stories is scheduled at the Eric Carle Museum in Amherst. Dramatizations of the novels "The Slave" and "Shosha" by the Israeli troupe Gesher Theater will open at the Lincoln Center Festival in July. Symposia, gala parties, lectures and film retrospectives will take place. And, with the assistance of the American Library Association, 60 local public libraries nationwide will sponsor events and discussions on Singer.

The feast should enable us to be part of a national conversation not only on Singer's durability, but also about the position of Jewish literature as a whole in America. As expected, this conversation starts in these very pages, for, in spite of his on-and-off relationship with its editorial staff, *Der Forverts* built Singer's audience. This special supplement of the Forward includes "Two," a powerful, never-before-seen story by Singer that I found in the Ransom Center. It also showcases an essay by Dara Horn on the Singer siblings and the notion of creativity in families (along with an excerpt from "Deborah," the novel by Singer's sister, which was translated by her son, the late literary critic Maurice Carr, and will be reissued in July by The Feminist Press). The reader will also find a piece on demonology by Esther Schor and a first-person essay by Jeff Sharlet in defense of Singer's amorality. For the "Album," I asked a handful of authors — Jonathan Safran Foer, Francine Prose and Joyce Carol Oates, among them — to offer micro-appreciations. Judy Budnitz goes beyond: She maps her attempts, as a writer, to locate Singer's "magic."

The essays in this section ask important questions, including one compelling to me: If Singer is only the second non-English speaker to be included in the American literary canon safeguarded by The Library of America — the only other one is Vladimir Nabokov — does his inclusion confirm that he no longer belongs in the Yiddish pantheon?

The response they seem to come up with is no: As complicated a figure as Singer might be, in the end he is, like the majority of us, a hyphenated figure — a bit Polish, abundantly American and inescapably Jewish. And he is also a *classic*, able to transcend, through his florid, hypnotizing fiction, the confines of his own environment.

A Writer Searches for Singer's Magic

◄ MAGIC *Page S3*

aspects of the stories that I've never noticed before. These days, one of the new things I notice is the odd feeling of déjà vu they give me. When I pick up one of his stories, I immediately feel a sense of familiarity. It often takes me a few paragraphs or pages to figure out whether I've read a particular story before — which is not to say that Singer's stories are repetitious or predictable or redundant. Not in the least. But they share a tone and atmosphere that are distinctly his; the moment you begin one of his stories, you sense that you are in his hands, in his world. You may be reading a completely new story, but you can sense characters from other stories hovering in the wings, just next door, just out of sight.

Another aspect of his writing that I've recently noticed for the first time is his skill with opener sentences. In my own writing, I've always been fussy about the beginnings of stories, always struggled to find the perfect first sentence. Singer's openings, though I'd never paid attention to them before, are brilliant. They always thrust the reader into the story immediately. He doesn't bother with preliminaries, with setting things up or easing in the reader gently. He just starts the story with a bang, and the reader immediately finds himself in the middle of it.

"First she wrote me a long letter full of praise," begins "The Admirer." Was there ever a first sentence more weighted with implication, more imbued with anticipation? We assume the "admirer" of the title is this mysterious, unnamed she. The word "first" suggests a long series of favors to come. If "a long letter full of praise" is only the first, what could possibly come next? At first, the story progresses in the way we might expect: The admirer wants to meet the narrator of the story, a writer who one might assume is an alter ego of Singer himself. She pays him a visit. And then things go awry in marvelously absurd, unpredictable ways.

Such openers are full of momentum, like a round boulder poised on a steep hill — the action begins

Isaac Bashevis Singer

Collected Stories

Edited by Ilan Stavans

For Isaac Bashevis Singer's centennial, an authoritative three-volume collection of the Nobel Laureate's beloved stories, several published here for the first time.

immediately. Other stories have similarly beguiling starts: "Why should a Polish Jew in New York publish a literary magazine in German?" ("The Joke"), "Herman Gombiner opened one eye" ("The Letter Writer") and "After her father's death Yentl had no reason to remain in Yanev" ("Yentl the Yeshiva Boy"). Singer's characters are always about to make a move, poised on the brink of some action — whether it be as small as opening one's other eye or leaving home forever.

Singer was a master at the subtle use of symbolism, too. His stories are full of symbols, but he doesn't thrust them into the foreground; instead they're slipped, here and there, in places where they don't call attention to themselves. I recently reread one of my favorite stories, "The Cafeteria," and for the first time noticed a fabulous symbol. The narrator, a writer, encounters a character named Esther several times throughout the story; she first catches his eye because she appears so much younger than the usual elderly cafeteria crowd. At one meeting he notes that her hair had turned gray, and he thinks, "how strange — the fur hat, too, seemed to have grayed." At a later encounter, he thinks, "it must have been snowing again, because her hat and the shoulders of her coat were trimmed with white." Another time, the woman tells the narrator a fantastic story of seeing Hitler, still alive and in that very cafeteria, holding a strange midnight ceremony. He assures her that what she has seen is a memory or vision. Later, the narrator glimpses Esther with an old half-remembered acquaintance, and she's wearing "a new coat, a new hat." He tries to find her again and cannot. He begins to wonder if he's seeing things, if the mysterious woman herself is a ghost; ultimately he begins to question his own definition of reality.

The details about the woman's evolving outerwear don't call attention to themselves. They're placed delicately, among other sensory descriptions. And yet they add something to the story, a sort of thematic progression running through it beneath the surface. Even if you don't consciously notice the coat and hat, perhaps unconsciously they shape your impression of Esther.

This is why I'll continue to read and reread Singer — for these unexpected angles and discoveries that have been hidden in the stories all along. And for the pleasure of re-entering the strange and magical and yet familiar Singer world. I feel toward Singer as Esther did, when she told the writer-narrator: "I read you and I know that you have a sense of the great mysteries."

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Two

A Short Story by Isaac Bashevis Singer

After the taxi driver had been promised $25 plus a five dollar tip he became silent. The two passengers were silent, too.

David Melnitz crammed his frail shape into a corner of the cab. He was dozing lightly, but every once in a while he opened one eye and looked through the window. The summer night had a blackness which nothing could lighten. Street lamps, headlights, lit-up windows made the darkness even denser. For a moment the air smelled to him of forests and in the next of gasoline, oil, melting asphalt and something American which the European nose can never identify. The taxi went over a bridge, through a tunnel and past a garish restaurant with richly covered tables, waiters in frock coats, men in tuxedos and women in evening dresses. Then it vanished like a mirage and the taxi rolled by a mountain of broken automobiles riding on top of one another in a kind of ruinous bacchanal. For a time the taxi stopped — David Melnitz saw police cars, a blazing light, an ambulance. Men were trying to pull a victim from under an overturned truck. Then the taxi continued.

On the left side, Dora crouched. It was hard to tell if she was asleep or just sinking into torpor. As she got into the taxi, she had said to David: "I am going to my own funeral," and since then, Melnitz hadn't heard a word from her. He wondered if she had already taken some of her sleeping pills or she had changed her mind altogether. After all, it was her plan.

They came to a colony of bungalows with a neon sign over the office. The taxi stopped at the door, and Melnitz handed the driver three ten dollar bills. The driver said nothing. Grim as the circumstances were, Melnitz became annoyed at the driver for not showing even the minimum of civility. "This country is falling to pieces," he said to himself. Aloud he said: "Dora, we're here."

Dora started. He took her by the wrist and helped her out. She dragged her feet and only now he noticed that she was wearing dark glasses. After the taxi rolled away, Melnitz said to her: "Don't

"Everything will happen as said," Dora mumbled.

Melnitz went into the toilet and dallied there a few minutes. He came out and said: "This night was supposed to be a holiday for us, not Tishahb'ov. Take off the glasses. I want to see your eyes."

"Leave me alone."

He opened his satchel and took out a bottle of cognac, two glasses and a box of cookies. There was no table, so he placed them on a chair. Through the screen window he could see cars passing, and a bit of glowing sky, without moon and without stars. "This colony is a brothel where everyone must bring his own whore," he thought. He asked: "Do you want a drink?"

Without taking her hands from her face, she nodded.

He filled two glasses. Usually when they drank, they clinked glasses and said L'chaim. But now these words would have been a mockery. Dora took her left hand from her face, lifted the glass and poured the drink into her mouth with the expertise of a drunk. David sipped his slowly. He never had much desire for liquor. He felt a harshness in his nose and his throat burned. He had to chase it down with a cookie. He heard Dora say: "More." He gave her a second glass and then a third. He could never understand how such a skinny girl could pour so much alcohol into herself. She opened up her pocketbook, took out a cigarette and lit it. She was sitting up straight and her face had become somewhat more animated.

"Now," he insisted, "take off those miserable glasses."

"No."

"Well, if that's the way you want it. What are we going to do now?" he asked, ashamed of his own question. According to their plan, they were to spend the night making love, but it was clear to him that Dora would sabotage even that. "I'll be completely passive," he decided. For a while he rummaged in his open satchel where he had his passport, a pair of pajamas, two bank books which together accounted for about $1500 and

Aloud he said: "You can get undressed if you want."

Dora did not reply.

"I'll put out the light."

"Give me another glass."

2

Melnitz turned off the light, undressed and put on his pajamas. Dora remained in her dress and stockings. She didn't answer when he spoke to her. He nudged her from under the sheet. It was obvious that her silence was calculated: she was trying to wreck their plan without admitting that she had changed her mind. He was certainly not going to remind her of her passionate statements about their dying together and being buried beside one another. He had bought two plots from the Prashker Society — one for himself and one for her, but he knew now that

other when they talked about them. He could never make out how she had survived, and she still wondered how he got out alive. She had sworn holy oaths that she had never given herself to the murderers, but he was far from convinced. He heard himself say: "Dora, darling, I have no complaints. This is my last night with you. Let's not lie around like angry honeymooners. Talk to me. That's all I ask. Tomorrow, you'll go your way and I'll go mine."

She didn't answer, and for a while it seemed that she wouldn't speak at all. Then she said in a clear, unsleepy voice: "What should I talk about?"

"First of all, turn to me. Let's not part like strangers."

Again she waited, and then turned slowly. The springs of the mattress vibrated.

"Dora, you shouldn't think that I ever believed your promises, even for a minute." He spoke with the painful feel-

attack, Dora's quarrel with Sylvia and the liquidation of their shop. All of this could not be mere chance. Both of them had lost one job after another. They became estranged from their relatives and friends. It was eerie, but he had foreseen their coming here tonight — perhaps he had dreamed about it. He had envisioned the bungalow, its coolness, the broad bed, the hard pillow and the window that let in a bit of shimmering light. Even a rationalist like Spinoza had believed in the theoretical possibility of predicting life with the same exactness as charting eclipses of the sun, except that he hadn't realized that causality and teleology are two sides of one coin.

As he kissed Dora's neck, he took stock of his life. God? The mortality of the soul? Hell? If the world was a product of God's justice, then he, Melnitz, was ready to roast on a bed of coals. His acceptance of death was somehow connected with the hope of revelation. If there is a soul, and a hereafter, he wanted to know what they were like. It was strange to think that all this could be reached with a few pills.

It had started to rain. There was lightning and thunder. For a second, the bungalow lit up and he saw his jacket, his trousers, the bottle of cognac, Dora's shoes.

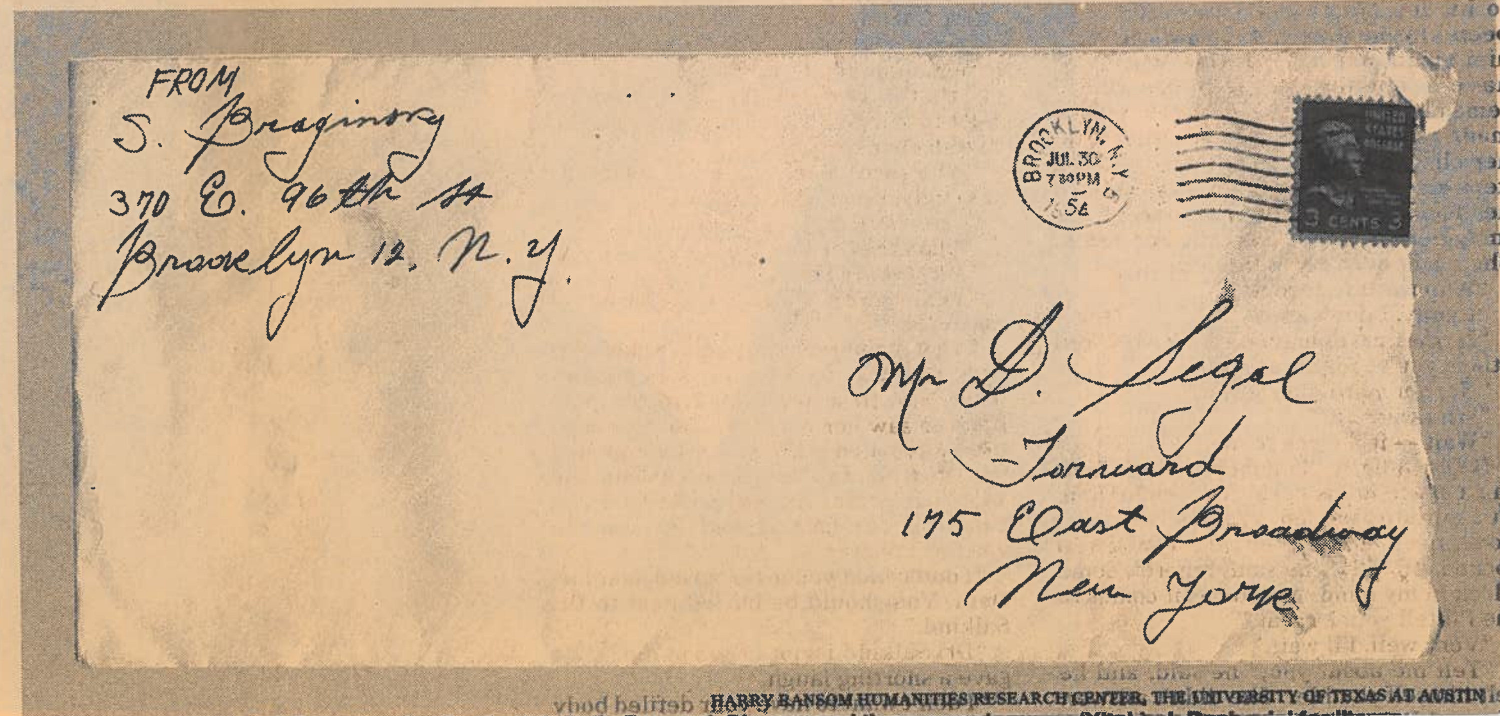
"Aren't you hot in that dress?" he asked.

"Hot? No."

"Why didn't you bring a nightgown with you?"

"What for?"

Yes, what for? He had imagined that in this last night with Dora he would devote himself to his passion for her body, indulge all his whims, shake off all his (and her) inhibitions. But it seemed that it was not to be. He remembered the Yid-



HARRY RANSOM HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTER, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

HIS MANY FACES: while writing for the Jewish Daily Forward, Singer used three pseudonyms: 'Isaac Bashevis' for literary works, 'Y. Varshavsky' for reviews and 'D. Segal' (seen above, sent to the Forward's former address) for his tabloid journalism.

make a scene. If you've changed your mind, tell me openly."

"I didn't change my mind." Her voice was hoarse, almost mannish.

"Wait. I'll be back soon." He left her not far from the office. She remained standing, bent like a rag doll ready to collapse. Her handbag, hanging from her wrist, almost touched the ground. "Well, she's an actress to the very end." He went to the office and paid for the room. A girl with a man's shirt and cut-off blue jeans on her naked legs took them to the bungalow. The girl opened the door and lit a single, naked bulb. The room was unpainted and had a beamed roof but no ceiling. It contained a broad bed, a clothes rack and a toilet. "The shower is outside," the girl said.

Then she went back to the office. Melnitz put down his satchel.

"Take off the dark glasses."

Dora said nothing.

"What do you need the sunglasses for? It's dark in here anyhow."

Dora sat down on the edge of the bed, with her head in her hands. He said, "It was all your idea. You always talked as if life had no value for you. I don't insist you keep your word. We can stay here tonight and tomorrow you can go wherever you want. I may stay here, but it has nothing to do with you."

an envelope with the inscription: To Whom It May Concern. Where were the pills? He found them. He put his hand absently into his breast pocket and pulled out a prescription that had never been filled and his Blue Cross card, which entitled him to three weeks in Mt. Sinai Hospital, where Dr. Beller had already arranged a semi-private room for him. All this was unnecessary now. He no longer needed doctors, documents, nurses or money. He had forgotten what day of the week it was. All he remembered was that it was the middle of August because that was when he began to suffer from hayfever.

"I wonder why I'm not sneezing," he thought, and at that moment, he felt an itching in his nose and sneezed three times.

He glanced at the bed. Dora had taken off her shoes and stretched out in her stocking feet, flat, small, thin, her hair half black, half blond from the time she had dyed it, her face narrow and white with sunken cheeks and a pointed chin. She was still wearing her sunglasses. He had almost forgotten the expression in her eyes. He stood for a while, musing to himself. Fear? — no. Desire? — no again. "I shouldn't have dragged her into all of this," he reproached himself.

she was not going to be his neighbor there.

Somewhere in his mind, he was laughing. For all his skepticism, he still believed in people and their talk. But who had asked her to make all these promises? They lay silently, she with her face toward the wall, he facing her back on the other side of the bed. He put his hand on her hip for an instant and then took it away. The pills and a glass of water were on the night table where he had put them, but he would have to send her away before he swallowed them. He had reached the point at which no human behavior, no matter how contradictory, surprised him. After Maydanek and Stutthof, nothing could astound him. He had seen a former Yiddish teacher become a kapo and serve the Nazis. In the ghetto he had seen Jewish women going to a nightclub, dressed in silk and velvet stepping over people who were dying of starvation. He witnessed a Nazi whipping a girl to death in the presence of her mother. Dora had been through the same things, and although their experiences were similar, they could never really communicate with each

SVENSKA AKADEMIEN
har vid sitt sammanträde den 5 oktober 1978
i överensstämmelse med föreskrifterna
i det av
ALFRED NOBEL
den 27 november 1895 upprättade
testamente beslutat att tilldela
ISAAC BASHEVIS
SINGER
1978 års Nobelpris i litteratur:
För hans intensiva berättarkonst,
som med rötter i en
polsk-judisk kulturtradition
levandegör universella
mänskliga villkor.
Stockholm den 10 december 1978

HARRY RANSOM HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTER, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

ing that he was not saying what he wanted to say. "You're thirteen years younger than I, and thank God, you're not sick. I want you to live and if possible, be happy. Don't interrupt me. I know in advance what you want to say. You owe me nothing — absolutely nothing. What I have is cancer, not a tumor. I couldn't even get through this operation and if I did, it would only prolong the process a few months. You know this as well as I do. Your life is just beginning, and if there is a God, and one can pray to Him, you can be sure that I'll——"

"Shut up."

"Alright."

"I came here to die with you, so don't try to change my mind."

"The way you sat in the taxi, I thought ——"

"I have a terrible headache. It took everything I had not to scream."

"I think I have some aspirin in my satchel," he said, realizing how wild and funny and idiotic his words sounded. He also knew that no matter what else they said tonight it would sound ridiculous, melodramatic and unnatural. Language is for the living, not for the dead. He asked: "Shall I give you something?"

"No, nothing."

"Shall I put on the light?"

"No. No."

"I'll bring out the bottle."

He rolled out of bed. By this time, he was used to the darkness. From outside, a dim light shone into the room. He got back into bed and reached her the bottle. She drank straight from it and it sounded like gargling. When she passed the bottle on to him, it was lighter in his hand. He took a draught, but he couldn't get drunk and he didn't intend to. He put the unfinished bottle on the floor. Vapors of alcohol passed from his stomach to his brain. He was neither intoxicated nor sober. Could one drink himself to death? Dora was still silent, but it seemed to him she was coming around and was getting ready to talk. He felt a rush of love for her: she had come here to die with him. He wanted to embrace her and kiss her but a bashfulness that often goes together with the deepest intimacy held him back. It had gotten colder and he was about to cover himself, but he delayed it. A single mosquito buzzed. Somewhere, in a third or fourth bungalow, a radio was playing and he heard the muffled music. If only it could always be night and the bed could be their grave! Dora said: "Come cover me."

They lay down and he covered her with the sheet and blanket. He put his arms around her and she clung to him as she had in the old days, at the beginning of their relationship: his arm around her neck, her knee between his. How many times did they lie like this, in hotels, bungalows, furnished rooms, in her house and in his! But everything had conspired to make this night the last: his tumor (or whatever it was), his quitting his job at the Bialik school, his wife's refusal to divorce him, Dora's mother's heart

dish expression "I made my calculations without the Boss." Apparently, sex and suicide make strange bedfellows. He heard himself say: "I have one request before it's all over."

"What kind of request?"

"Let's not die with lies. Let's tell each other the entire truth, no matter how ugly." His words sounded overly solemn to him. He realized that he was preparing for their mutual confession all this time. He didn't want to die deceived or even a deceiver. Dora stiffened and moved away from him slightly. For a long time she said nothing, and he suspected that she had fallen asleep. Then she said: "Very well."

"Let's swear that we tell each other everything."

"Swear by what?"

3

They haggled, each demanding that the other confess first. He was afraid that she would change her mind about confessing if he made his revelations first, but then he gave in. They had to go through this. It was the culmination of his plans — perhaps the only reason for his bringing her here. He was giving his tongue permission to divulge all his secrets: he didn't intend to censor himself.

"I had other women while we were together," he said, with a kind of choked solemnity.

"Who? How many?"

He was silent while he counted them in his mind. According to his calculation (made days or weeks before) there had been seven, but now he remembered only five. Two had vanished from his memory. Perhaps he already was entering the amnesia that he intended to make total. He said: "It's strange, but I've forgotten."

"How many do you remember?" She moved even further away from him.

He was suddenly frightened, although he knew there was nothing to be afraid of. The worst she could do was refuse to confess.

"About one you certainly know—my wife."

"Who are the others?"

"You know about two others. I was with them before you and while we were together. Bella and Esther."

"All this time?"

"With Bella just for a year. With Esther it dragged on until not long ago."

"How long?"

"Until about half a year ago."

Even though she had moved to the other side of the bed, he could hear her heavy breathing. He thought he could feel the beat of her heart.

"Who else?" Dora's voice became rasping.

"A woman from Lublin."

"Who is she?"

"A middle-aged woman. Her husband left for Russia in 1939 and she stayed with her daughter in a village near Kras-

nistaw. A peasant hid them. The daughter was shot by the Nazis. She was denounced by a Szmalcownik. Her mother came here after 1945. I knew her when I was a teacher in Lublin."

"What happened to her husband?"

"He died in Jambul of dysentery."

"And she never re-married?"

"She has a second husband. A simple man. A furrier."

"Is he a refugee too?"

"Yes, he's a refugee too."

"When did this happen?"

Melnitz had to think, unwilling to lie even about a date.

"A few months after we met. Do you remember an evening when I went to a lecture at the Labor Temple and you refused to go with me? I met her there."

"I remember it very well. My mother was in the hospital."

"I don't remember that."

"Who were the others?"

He told her and she asked him short, dry questions, apparently restraining her anger. He now had recalled one of the two he had forgotten, but the other had left his mind a blank. He began to doubt if there had been a number seven, as he referred to her. Of those he remembered the first he had met in a cafeteria on Broadway and the second was the mother of one of his pupils. They were all middle-aged refugees, either verging on poverty or complete paupers. The one he met in a cafeteria was a divorcée. She worked in a pocketbook shop and had a thirteen year old daughter who studied in a yeshiva in Brooklyn. These weren't love adventures, but continuations of what went on in the ghettoes, and later, after 1945, when people were smuggled across borders, searching for relatives in ruined cities and wandering from camp to camp. While he answered Dora's questions he kept on searching for some lead to his lost number seven — who had been erased from his memory leaving him numb and baffled. How could this have happened? "I can't die until I remember who she is." Dora had not yet made any comments and he knew from her clipped sentences and the way she kept away from him that what he told her had turned her into an enemy. He imagined he heard her grit her teeth. She might even try to kill him.

"Who was the seventh?"

"Really, I don't know."

"In that case, maybe there were ten others you've forgotten."

"No, not more than seven."

"Who was she?"

"Wait — it'll come to me."

He lay quietly, thoughtless, as if clearing a space in his brain for recollection. But minutes passed, and the cell that contained this adventure remained locked. "Really," he said, "there's some block in my mind. As soon as it comes to me I'll tell you. I swear."

"Very well. I'll wait."

"Tell me about you," he said, and he felt himself shudder. She didn't answer. He could almost hear her fighting with herself. Then she said, "Well, there was one."

light on he began to vomit. He retched again and again. Fiery patterns flew in front of his eyes and bells rang in his ears, just as when he got sick as a boy. He recognized the designs, the colors, the sparks, the changing of the shapes. The whole dreamy web seemed to have been lurking in his optic nerves waiting to appear with full exactness. The smell of today's and yesterday's meals floated up to him: the cinnamon of the cookies and the aroma of the cognac. "She's unclean. Unclean," a voice called in him. He didn't know himself if it was piety or hypocrisy. "We're not Jews anymore, we're Nazis." He was about to return to bed, but his stomach lurched again. "When did I gorge so much?" He felt he was spitting out his innards. He groaned. His knees buckled. A terrible stench came out from the bowl and Melnitz realized it could not only be physical. Matter could never stink like that. He heard Dora's voice say: "What's wrong. Can I help you?"

"You can't help me," he called back, and began to retch again. He slammed the door. He tried to flush, but the chain broke.

4

They lay in bed. "Now I don't mind dying," Dora said to him. "You're such a cheat that nothing matters anymore."

"What about you? You're nothing but a whore!"

"I did it because I knew you were fooling around. In spite of all your reassurances and oaths."

"Only yesterday you swore you were faithful," he said.

"Compared to you, I was fidelity itself!"

"Wait, it'll all end tonight. We won't leave here alive. They'll carry us out."

She fell into silence. "If I could at least take my mother with me," she said half to herself and half to him.

"It's too late for that. You have no right to kill your mother. She's a decent Jewish woman."

"Who cares about rights? If everyone is so ugly, there are no rights."

"There still may be a God."

"What kind of God?"

"A heavenly Hitler."

"Yes, that's what he is. I want a cigarette."

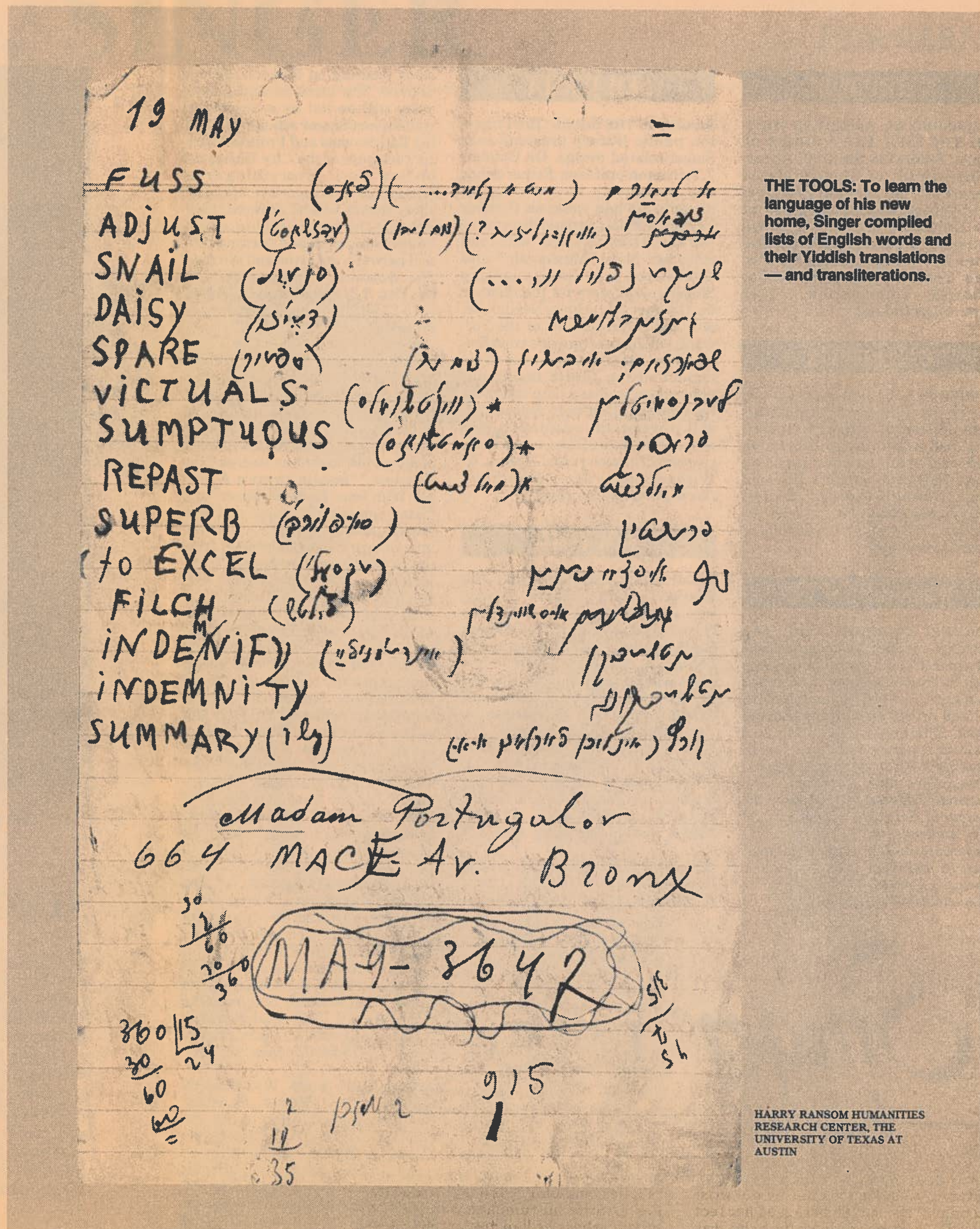
To get out of bed, she had to crawl over him. She was looking for her pocketbook. She lit a match and in the pale light he saw her barefoot, her hair rumpled, a crooked smile on her half opened lips. Instead of getting back into bed, she sat on a chair. As she pulled on the cigarette, her face glowed. He saw the glint in her eyes.

"I don't want you to be buried near me, Dora. You should be buried next to Dr. Salkind."

"Dr. Salkind is not about to die." She gave a snorting laugh.

"I don't want to have your defiled body near mine."

"In that case, I'll leave a letter that



THE TOOLS: To learn the language of his new home, Singer compiled lists of English words and their Yiddish translations — and transliterations.

HARRY RANSOM HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTER, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

molecule thinks by itself. Or maybe the earth has a brain in its center made up

begun? Did he, Melnitz, subconsciously desire death? "I'm sinking in slime," he

"I don't want to die," Dora moaned. "I want to kill all your females first. I'll

"Tell me about you," he said, and he felt himself shudder. She didn't answer. He could almost hear her fighting with herself. Then she said, "Well, there was one."

His heart stopped for an instant.

"Who?"

"Dr. Salkind." The word hit him with a physical blow on his temple. He could barely speak: "Why?"

"Oh, just because. He was chasing after me. Besides, I knew you weren't faithful."

"How did you know?"

"I knew. I was only with him a few times."

"Why only a few times?"

"He didn't interest me, either physically or spiritually. Actually, he disgusted me."

"That didn't stop you from sleeping with him."

"Yes . . . I'm sorry." Silence followed. Salkind was the one who tried to persuade Dora to be psychoanalyzed. He had wanted to send her to a colleague of his, but she refused. Now Melnitz tried to recollect when Dora began her visits to Salkind. Did it happen this year? No, last year. Melnitz couldn't keep his teeth from chattering. At that instant he discovered who his seventh lover was: Florence, his English teacher. They had spent one miserable night together — a failure in every way; it was one of those nights when all of a man's illusions collapse. What he was feeling now was not hurt, but shame for his own conduct, for Dora's, for modern man. It didn't even pay to die. He rolled off the bed and went into the toilet, banging his knee on the chair, groping as if blind. He found the toilet and even before he could put the

gave a snorting laugh.

"I don't want to have your defiled body near mine."

"In that case, I'll leave a letter that they cremate me."

"Yes, you do that."

"You speak like some kind of saint," she said after a pause. "You are the worst liar and hypocrite. You keep on babbling about God, but you act like a devil. You never loved me."

"I did love you, to my regret. You said yourself that a man could love more than one woman, but if you could lie around with that schlemiel Salkind, you don't know what love is."

"If I don't know now, I never will."

"You don't even regret it."

"No, not now."

"I never hated anybody as I hate you," he said, with the feeling that he had already spoken these words, a long time ago. "Get out of here. Keep a four cubits distance from me!" he shouted, suddenly recognizing his father's voice. It was his voice, his tone, the same words his father had used years ago to rebuke him for cutting off his sidelocks and shortening his gabardine. Dora moved as if to get up. The chair squeaked under her.

"Where am I supposed to go in the middle of the night?" She took a last puff of her cigarette and threw it down on the linoleum. Melnitz watched the cigarette glow, then dim on the floor. A cigarette and it doesn't know it's a cigarette. Dying, without knowing that it's dying, Melnitz mused. Even if Spinoza was right and thought is one of the attributes of substance, what would a cigarette think? Unless each atom and molecule thinks by itself. Or maybe the earth has a brain in its center made up of molten metals — gold, iron, nickel, uranium. But it was too late for such nonsense. Aloud he said: "Did you do it in the daytime or at night?"

"The first time during the day."

"Where, in his office?"

"Yes."

"And there were patients in the waiting room?"

"There were no patients."

Melnitz felt like vomiting again. "What about the other times?"

"We went to a hotel."

"Where was I?"

"Probably with one of your whores."

"Cursed be the day I met you!" Again, it was not his language, his style. His father entered him like a dybbuk.

"Shut up. You're making a fool of yourself." She said quietly and matter-of-factly, "For you to preach morality is like Al Capone becoming a rabbi."

"Now it's even a disgrace to die," he said, almost apologetically.

"No one's forcing you."

"I'm going to gluttonize and sleep around until this cancer finishes me."

"You have no cancer. You'll go on swindling and deceiving until you're eighty."

He did not answer. He listened to his own body. He literally felt the growth in his stomach: heavy and bloated, the way, he imagined, a woman would feel if her baby died in her womb. He was pregnant with death. He could hear Dr. Beller's warning: "It has to be cut before it spreads." But how had it begun? Did he, Melnitz, subconsciously desire death? "I'm sinking in slime," he said to himself. He remembered a scene he had witnessed in a camp: a young Jew spat at a Nazi, and the Nazi buried him in excrement. Like that young fellow, he was perishing in filth. But why should that young man have had to suffer, and how could God, if He existed, ever rectify such evil? No Messiah, no angels, no paradise could compensate for the hours it took this young Jew to strangle in offal. The past is stronger than God; it is the law that even He has to obey. Who said it? Not even the Omnipotent can erase what has happened already.

"Come over here, you stinking carcass."

"Are you talking to me?" Dora asked.

"Who else? Come, you filth, you faithful servant of the God of Wrath," Melnitz called, surprised at his own words. There was an element of parody in them.

"What are you ranting about?"

"Oh, never mind."

"Wait. I'm going to smoke another cigarette."

"How many Nazis did you whore around with?"

She lit her cigarette and a whiff of smoke reached Melnitz. After a while, she crushed it out and went to him as if his terrible words were a code and a signal for her. She fell into his arms and he clung to her both with passion and disgust. All their inhibitions left them momentarily. They wrestled with each other, scolding one another and caressing with forgiving vengeance.

"I don't want to die," Dora moaned. "I want to kill all your females first. I'll take them all with me. I'll tear them all to pieces."

"And I'll murder that Dr. Salkind."

"Yes, do. He meant nothing to me. He didn't even satisfy me, that creep."

They fell back into their old familiar love chatter: half crazy fantasies, incoherent exclamations, promises of eternal love, dying together, being buried together, loving after the Resurrection — overtaken by that short-lived pathos which almost has an existence of its own and is degrading even while it lasts. They raved and grew silent. He closed his eyes and fell asleep. He opened them and it was still dark. "What an unending night," he wondered. "A wintry summer night." He poked Dora and she awoke — if she had not been shamming sleep.

"If you want to die, now's the time."

"I don't want to die." She hugged him tightly and wrapped her legs around him. Her hair tickled his face. Only now did he realize the strong scent of cognac on her breath. She half sighed, half giggled, in the way he once imagined Lilith the she-demon, whom Satan sends out at night to entice Yeshiva boys to sin.

"What happened to the pills?" he asked.

"I threw them down the drain."

"All of them?"

"Yes, my beloved. All of them."

Translated from Yiddish by Isaac Bashevis Singer and Laurie Colwin. *Reprinted by permission of Lescher & Lescher, Ltd. All rights reserved.*

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A NOVEL

By Peter Stephan Jungk

Michael Hofmann, translator

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Sam Garrett, translator

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CALENDAR

NATIONWIDE

'BECOMING AN AMERICAN WRITER: THE LIFE AND STORIES OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER': A traveling exhibit of Singer-related materials from the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin and other archives will visit locations in Florida, Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey. *For detailed information, visit www.singer100.org.*

CALIFORNIA

SINGER IN L.A.: Ilan Stavans, editor of the Library of America's new edition of Singer's stories, will lead a full day of discussion and activities commemorating Isaac Bashevis Singer's life and work. *Skirball Cultural Center, 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles; Oct. 17; 2 p.m. (310-440-4500 or www.skirball.org)*

MASSACHUSETTS

GETTING TO KNOW YOU: The National Yiddish Book Center caps off a month of Singer-related events with its annual summer conference on Singer, in which a panel of writers and artists explore his life and work. The conference also will include a performance of Isaiah Sheffer's Singer-inspired play, "Dreamers and Demons." *The National Yiddish Book Center on the campus of Hampshire College, Route 116, Amherst; July 11-15; Mon.-Fri.; conference and/or tours of exhibit open to members only; conference seating is limited. (413-256-4900 or www.yiddishbookcenter.org)*

NEW JERSEY

SINGER ON THE SHORE: The Princeton public library presents four Singer-related events. On October 7, Princeton professor Esther Schor will present an introduction to Singer's life and work; on October 21, Emily Mann, artistic director of the McCarter Theatre, will read from her play, "Meshugah," and discuss the process of adapting Singer's short story for the theater; on October 21, Alana Newhouse, arts and culture editor of the Forward, will discuss Singer's contributions to the Forward and their impact on the Jewish immigrant community; and at a date still to be determined, Gertrude Dubrovsky will present an adaptation of a Singer film, to be followed by a discussion. *Princeton Public Library, 65 Witherspoon St., Princeton. (www.princetonlibrary.org.)*

NEW YORK

FROM *MAMELOSHN* TO *IVRIT*: The Gesher Theatre Company re-imagines and transposes Singer's works from Yiddish writing to Hebrew and Russian theater, with productions of "Shosha" and "The Slave." The plays will be performed in Russian and Hebrew, with headphones providing simultaneous English translation. *John Jay College Theater; 899 10th Ave.; The Slave: July 20-23; Tue.-Fri.; 8-11 p.m.; Shosha: July 24-25; Sat. 3-6 p.m.; Sun.; 8-11 p.m.; tickets may be purchased through Lincoln Center; $60 all tickets for all shows. (212-219-0888 or www.lincolncenter.org)*

LIFE AND LOVES: The Mercantile Reading Group will be conducting a series of lectures and group discussions focusing on Singer's life and oeuvre. The lectures and discussions will be led by a number of well-known Singer scholars, including Ilan Stavans and Professor Morris Dickstein of the City University of New York. Everything from Singer's complicated love life to his short stories will be covered, highlighting the fascinating interplay between his work and personal life, and between the artist and the man. *The Mercantile Library, 17 E. 47th St.; Oct. 6-21; registration required. (212-755-6710 or www.mercantilelibrary.org)*

SINGER ON THE SCREEN: Jeffrey Shandler of Rutgers University lectures on how Singer's work and image have been represented and reinterpreted in film. Shandler will be reviewing selections from a number of Singer-inspired films, such as "The Cafeteria," "Isaac in America: A Journey With Isaac Bashevis Singer" and "Isaac Singer's Nightmare and Mrs. Pupko's Beard," as well as clips from little-known Singer interviews from the Jewish Museum archives. *The Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Ave. (at 92nd St.); Nov. 4; Thurs. 6:30 p.m.; $12, $10 seniors and students, $9 members. (212-423-3337 or www.jewishmuseum.org)*

BIOGRAPHERS & BRUNCH: Critic James Gibbons explores the life of Isaac Bashevis Singer. The Yiddish Nobel Prize winner's beloved and influential works include "Satan in Goray," "Enemies: A Love Story," "The Golem" and "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy." *The 92nd Street Y, 1395 Lexington Ave. (at 92nd St.); Oct. 3, 11 a.m.; tickets $35 (including buffet brunch). (212-415-5500 or www.92Y.org)*

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER, A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION: Introduced by Morris Dickstein, featuring Louis Begley, Jeremy Dauber, Tovah Feldshuh, Edith Kurzweil and Peter Reigert. The evening will feature archival recordings of the Nobel Prize winner's readings. *The 92nd Street Y, 1395 Lexington Ave. (at 92nd St.); Oct. 4, 8 p.m.; tickets $16. (212-415-5500 or www.92Y.org).*

GREAT NEW YORK WRITERS IN GREAT NEW YORK PLACES: Celebrity readers bring to life stories written by Isaac Bashevis Singer during World War II, in an event cosponsored by the Forward. *The Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, 36 Battery Pl.; Oct. 20; tickets $20. (646-437-4200 or www.mjhnyc.org).*

Singer 100

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

★ ★ ★ 1904-2004 ★ ★ ★

BRUCE DAVIDSON MAGNUM PHOTOS; COURTESY OF MEAD ART MUSEUM, AMHERST COLLEGE

CAFETERIA LADY: 'Ada Hirsh, the Tango Dancing Assistant Cashier,1973.'

SINGER COUNTRY

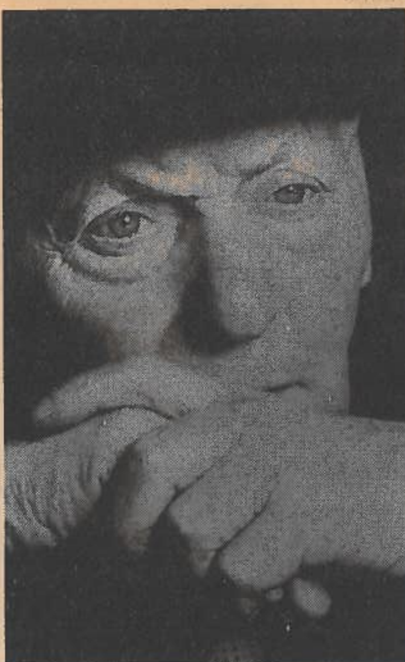
West 86th Street in Manhattan may be Isaac Bashevis Singer Boulevard, but the Garden Cafeteria — the popular meeting place for Jewish artists and authors — is, in many minds, Singer Country.

This fall, famed photographer Bruce Davidson offers "The Garden Cafeteria," an exhibit that will present a number of Garden Cafeteria and Lower East Side-based Singer portraits, Singer-inspired films and film stills, concluding with a slideshow and lecture conducted by Davidson himself.

By capturing in vivid photographic detail the great symbols of post-War American *yidishkayt*, the exhibit likely will serve as a poignant testament to and a reminder of the vibrancy and color of New York's lost secular *Yiddishe velt*.

The Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, Small Fairfield Gallery, Amherst, Mass.; Sept. 7-Oct. 24; Tue.-Wed. and Fri.-Sun. 1 p.m.-4:30 p.m.; Thurs. 10. a.m.-9 p.m.; free. (413-542-2335 or www.amherst.edu/~mead)

437-4200 or www.mjhnyc.org).



Courtesy of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin

Isaac Bashevis Singer Centennial

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"The Imaginary World of Isaac Bashevis Singer"

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- Howard Schwartz on Singer's children stories
- The Singer Archive Exhibition "Becoming an American Writer"

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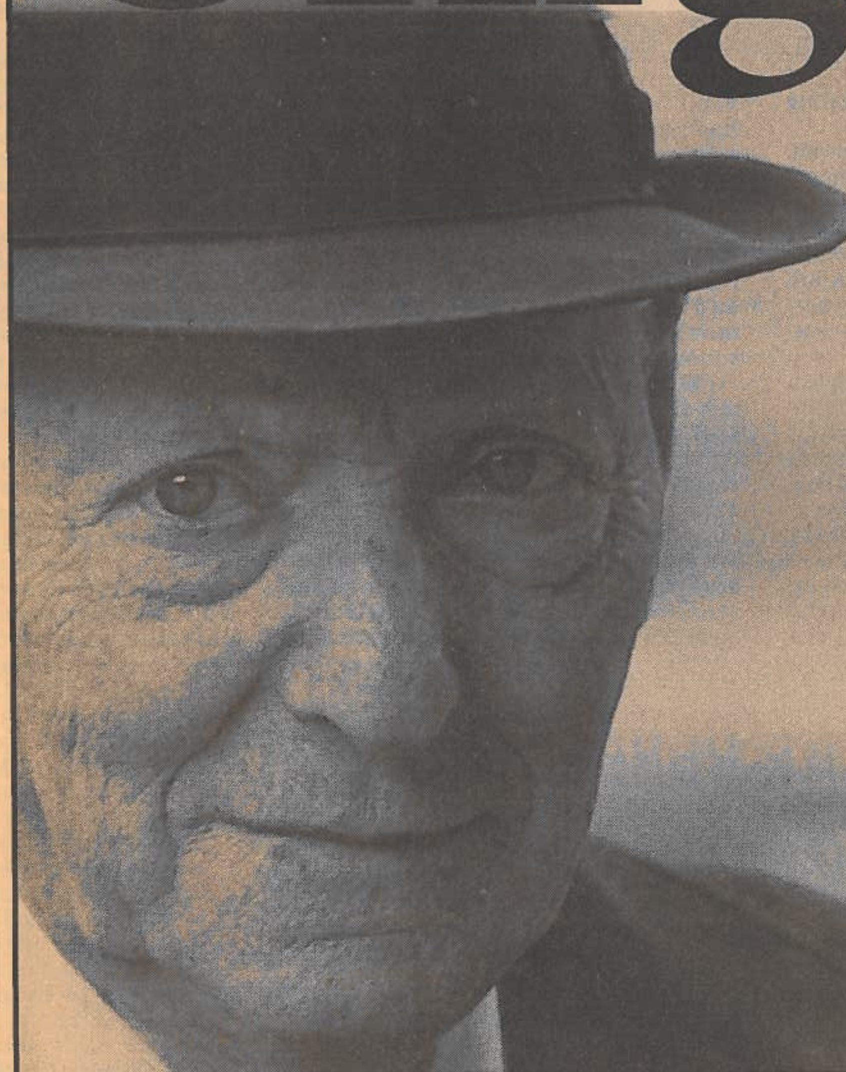
413-256-4900 ext. 116 / Monday–Friday 10–3:30; Sunday 11–4
www.yiddishbookcenter.org / e-mail: yiddish@bikher.org

A program of the Jack and Ruthe B. Cowl Center for Jewish Culture, generously sponsored by Sarah Paturick. The program is part of the Singer Centennial directed by The Library of America and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Isaac Bashevis Singer



Save the date
October 20, 2004

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Singer 100
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The **Isaac Bashevis Singer Centennial** is a year-long celebration of Singer and his work directed by The Library of America and supported by a major grant from The National Endowment for the Humanities. For more information, and a complete calendar of events nationwide, please visit **www.singer100.org**