

לקט

יִיִּדִישֶׁע שטודיעס היינט



Jiddistik heute

Yiddish Studies Today

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Der vorliegende Sammelband *לקט* eröffnet eine neue Reihe wissenschaftlicher Studien zur Jiddistik sowie philologischer Editionen und Studienausgaben jiddischer Literatur. Jiddisch, Englisch und Deutsch stehen als Publikationssprachen gleichberechtigt nebeneinander.

Leket erscheint anlässlich des XV. Symposiums für Jiddische Studien in Deutschland, ein im Jahre 1998 von Erika Timm und Marion Aptroot als für das in Deutschland noch junge Fach Jiddistik und dessen interdisziplinären Umfeld ins Leben gerufenes Forum. Die im Band versammelten 32 Essays zur jiddischen Literatur-, Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft von Autoren aus Europa, den USA, Kanada und Israel vermitteln ein Bild von der Lebendigkeit und Vielfalt jiddistischer Forschung heute.



יִיִּדִישׁ אױסגאַבעס און פֿאַרשונג

Jiddistik Edition & Forschung

Yiddish Editions & Research

Herausgegeben von Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed,
Roland Gruschka und Simon Neuberger

Band 1

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Jan Schwarz

“Nothing But a Bundle of Paper”

Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Literary Career in America

Isaac Bashevis Singer seemed really to live nowhere at all, though everyone had an address for him. He did not quite fit into the New World or the Old, so canny was he at adapting himself to American tastes, so skillful at exploiting those tastes for his own ends. His streak of opportunism often worked on behalf of his genius, and the public clowning in which he indulged neither seriously damaged his gifts as a perverse fabulist nor lacked a touch of contempt for his American admirers.

Irving Howe, *Margins of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography*¹

Unlike that of other Yiddish writers in North America after 1945, Isaac Bashevis Singer’s work has been thoroughly investigated in a variety of scholarly works in multiple fields. There are bibliographies of Singer’s work in Yiddish and English covering all stages of his career, with the exception of the period between 1952 and 1959.² Although an increasing number of studies examining Singer’s works have appeared since his death in 1991, much of his Yiddish work published in the daily newspaper פֿאַרווערטס and Yiddish journals has not yet been examined. Most of Singer’s work, which includes journalism, novels, life writing, and short stories, has not even been translated or reprinted in Yiddish in book form. David Neal Miller mentions that Singer published 907 items in Yiddish newspapers and journals from 1924 to 1949; only eleven of these (the novel אין גאַרני דער שטן, nine short stories, and one critical essay) have been translated into English. In her bibliography of Singer’s work from 1960 to 1991, Roberta Saltzman has compiled a list of Singer’s Yiddish fiction written during this period that has not been translated; it includes 11 novels, 11 novellas and 56 short stories.³ In addition, Singer published many works of life writing as serials in פֿאַרווערטס from the early 1950s onwards which have never been made available in book form in Yiddish or English.⁴ It is possible that future investigations of

1 Howe 1982: 264.

2 Miller 1983, 1979; Saltzman 2002. See also: Miller 1991. A footnote to this article states: “This article appears in somewhat different form as the introduction to the author’s *Bibliography of Isaac Bashevis Singer, 1952–1959*.” The latter work has still not been published.

3 Saltzman 2002: xiii f.

4 See Schwarz 2005: 142–152.

Singer's multifaceted work in the Yiddish newspapers and journals will reveal literary treasures that will further add to his literary reputation.

It is the English versions of Singer's works that have become definitive; translations into other languages (including Hebrew and Polish) are made from English, not Yiddish. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Singer scholarship as well was dominated by a focus on this corpus in English. Starting in the late 1980s, however, a new generation of Yiddish scholars began to study his Yiddish work.⁵ It is time for these two schools of Singer research to enrich each other, informed by an inclusive approach to the author's Yiddish and English corpus. Singer's Yiddish work must be the point of departure for any serious scholarly engagement. However, Singer's literary bilingualism as translator of his Yiddish work into English (almost always with the help of American translators), which began in the 1960s, became an integrated part of his oeuvre. The English versions of his Yiddish work (in some instances, significant differences exist between the two) are in many cases artistically superior to the original Yiddish newspaper editions. As a result, it is pertinent to view the Yiddish and English versions as belonging to one corpus without *a priori* privileging the Yiddish in which Singer first published almost all of his work.⁶

The crucial period of Singer's artistic career was the Polish period, between his debut in 1925 and his departure from Warsaw in 1935. In this decade (his twenties) he was at the center of the Yiddish literary world in Warsaw and contributed to both highbrow and *shund* journals.⁷ The sources for a reconstruction of this period in Singer's life can be found in his life writing written from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s in New York as well as in his journalistic and literary contributions to Polish Yiddish periodicals between 1925 and 1935. However, this voluminous material has not yet been systematically examined to outline the particulars of Singer's Polish period, where the keys to his later development and meteoric rise to fame in America can be found.⁸ Singer

5 See Wolitz 2001 and Sherman 2007b.

6 Chaim Grade published eighteen books in Yiddish between 1936 and 1976. During his lifetime, six books of Grade's works (short stories, novels and life writing) were published in English translation. See Lisek 2007: 74f. Singer, on the other hand, published considerably fewer books in Yiddish than in English.

7 The fact that there was no strict division between journalism and highbrow literature was emblematic of the discourse of Polish Yiddish culture in the interwar period. In that regard, Singer's multiple cultural engagements were typical: "The absence of clear-cut professional boundaries was in part a consequence of the weak economic base of Yiddish culture in Poland. Intellectuals needed to 'dance at many weddings' in order to make a living. The daily press and popular theater were the only financially secure cultural institutions." Fishman 2005: 90.

8 Crucial for such an examination of Singer's Polish period are the works of Chone

grew up in an ultra-Orthodox home that, in its extreme piety, was quite unusual compared with the backgrounds of his Yiddish literary peers. As a result of his exposure to his Hasidic father's rabbinical court in Warsaw, and the traditional Judaism of his maternal grandfather, the Bilgoray rabbi (Singer lived in Bilgoray from age 13 to 17), he could draw on much deeper experiences of traditional Jewish life than his contemporaries. Furthermore, like his older brother I. J. Singer (1893–1944), Singer had a phenomenal memory that would serve him well as an artist obsessively mining his autobiographical past.⁹

In 1935, Singer followed his brother I. J. Singer to New York, where the latter, who had arrived in 1933, had become an internationally renowned novelist and contributor to the פֿאַרווערטס, the *Jewish Daily Forward*. Thanks to his older brother's reputation, the lesser-known Singer landed a contract with פֿאַרווערטס just a few months after arriving in New York. Abe Cahan, the legendary פֿאַרווערטס editor, invited Singer to serialize his new novel in the newspaper. It began biweekly publication on October 5, 1935 under the title דער זינדיקער משיח: אַ היסטאָרישער ראָמאַן (The Sinful Messiah: A Historical Novel). Following his critically acclaimed debut novel דער שטן אין גאָרין (Satan in Goray, 1933), in *The Sinful Messiah* Singer depicted a controversial figure from Jewish history, Jacob Frank (1726–1791), who had been influenced by the Sabbatean creed. Frank and his followers converted to Catholicism en masse in mid-eighteenth-century Poland. That novel has never been published in book form and was considered a failure by the author. However, according to a short article in פֿאַרווערטס from 1936, the novel was highly popular among its readers.¹⁰ Singer published no more fiction for the next seven years, instead writing an increasing number of tabloid-style articles with titles like "People Who Enjoy Hurting Others and People Who Get Pleasure from Being Hurt" and "Divorced His Wife and Took Her as a Lover."

Shmeruk and Nathan Cohen. See Cohen 2003; Shmeruk 1981–1982. The latter article includes a list of autobiographical novels and memoirs about interwar Warsaw published in פֿאַרווערטס from the mid-1950s until 1981. Most of these works have never appeared in book form in English or Yiddish. See also Fishman 2005: 83–139; Yungman 1985. Two other formative experiences in Singer's Polish period are Tlomatske 13, the address and unofficial name of the Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Warsaw, where he spent a great deal of time; and the influence of Hillel Zeitlin, the important post-Hasidic religious philosopher in Warsaw whose son, the poet Aaron Zeitlin, collaborated with Singer in the publication of the journal *Globus* from 1932 to 1934. See Cohen 2002; Szeintuch 2000, a volume of Aaron Zeitlin's letters from Warsaw in the interwar period; Zeitlin 1946. For a selection of Yiddish prose literature in interwar Poland, see Trunk and Zeitlin 1946.

9 See Singer 1984: xi.

10 Isaac Bashevis Singer Papers, The Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, file 81: 8.

In 1943, Singer published a reprint of שטן אין גאָרני (the Evil Inclination), part of a planned series of monologues entitled *The Diary of the Evil One*. Singer's talent for storytelling blossomed in these monologues' formulaic battles between Good and Evil among ordinary shtetl Jews who were tempted by the Evil One to perpetrate the most outrageously transgressive acts. Singer turned these monologues into a sustained narrative unit, subverting the progressive humanism of Yiddish writers such as I. L. Peretz and Sh. An-sky, author of the renowned play דער דיבוק. Peretz's debut work, the epic poem מאַניש (1888) is told by an omniscient third-person narrator. Monish, the innocent young Talmud scholar, is tempted to perpetrate the ultimate act of heresy: he swears eternal love to Marie, the Gentile daughter of a German businessman, by the name of God: פֿון דער / – פֿון זינדיקן מויל אַרויסגעזאָגט / דעם נאָמען גאָט... / "he sinfully speaks the name of God / and is struck by the thunder of His rod."¹² As a result, Monish is condemned to an eternal Jewish purgatory. In Singer's pieces, in contrast, the Sabbatean creed of sexual promiscuity as "redemption through sin" leads the characters to utter desperation and suicide.¹³

While Monish is punished by having his earlobe nailed to a doorpost in the netherworld, a Jewish purgatory, Singer graphically outlines the collective punishment of his sinners in the story דער חורבן פֿון קרע (The Destruction of Kreshev), included in the 1943 volume. Having encouraged his wife Lise to commit adultery with a servant named Leybl Shmayser (Laybl Whip), Lise's husband eventually confesses everything to the town rabbi. The punishment is swiftly carried out with a vengeance. Carted through the town, Lise becomes the target of verbal and physical abuse from the shtetl's Jews. Again Singer subverts the father of Yiddish literature I. L. Peretz, who in the story דריי מתנות (Three Gifts) had portrayed a martyred woman's heroism. The woman pinned her dress to her body in order to maintain her chastity (צניעות) during a similar act of public humiliation. The main difference, however, is that in Peretz's story the abusers are anti-Semites cheered on by priests and the mayor of the town, while in Singer's the drama is played out entirely among Jews with almost no reference to the Gentile world. Again, Peretz's martyrological universe, the quintessential sanctum of mod-

¹¹ Singer 1943.

¹² Howe, Wisse and Shmeruk 1987: 80–81. Translation by Seymour Mayne.

¹³ Like the German Jewish kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), Singer turned Sabbatai Zevi into the prototype of his times. Scholem's first published essay about Sabbatai Zevi, "Redemption through Sin" (Scholem 1971: 78–141), originally appeared in 1937. Later, in his magisterial study *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (1973), Scholem would acknowledge Singer's stories as one of the most vivid expressions of Polish kabbalism in its "unique fascination with the sphere of evil." Both Scholem and Singer mapped the long historical trajectory of Jewish destruction and renewal. Scholem 1974: 299.

ern Yiddish culture, has been violently imploded by Singer's chillingly detached depiction of the collective orgy of revenge that descends on the poor sinner Lise, who eventually commits suicide. Singer closes one of his darkest stories with the complete destruction of Kreshev in a conflagration perpetrated by Leybl Shmayser. The only character to escape the *yeytser-hore's* evil net is Gimpel, Lise's father. This namesake of the righteous Gimpel the Fool (1945) would reappear under different guises in Singer's stories published after the Holocaust.

די פֿאַמיליע מושקאַט (The Family Moskat), Singer's first work to be translated into English, became the test case for his standard procedure after 1950 of trimming and shortening the Yiddish novels serialized in פֿאַרווערטס. The correspondence between the publisher Alfred A. Knopf and Singer in 1948–1949 indicates that initially the latter, contrary to the demand of his publisher, was against cutting the Yiddish text. Knopf pointed out that Singer's older brother I. J. Singer had no issues "in cutting very considerably *The Brothers Ashkenazi*," which the publisher had made available in English in 1936. The main issue was that the American readership in English was very different from Singer's Yiddish readers: "After all you must remember that we are publishing books in English for American readers to whom you are not as yet even a name." A central part of the editing and translating of Yiddish novels was the question of accessibility that applied to foreign language writing in general, regardless of the fact that Singer (and many other Yiddish writers) lived not in a foreign country but in New York, where they had a huge, devoted readership. Knopf perceptively articulated the quality that set Singer's work apart, "which I respect as being a sort of monument to a life that has ceased to exist and will never exist again." Literature as retrospective reconstruction of a lost world would be a central trope of post-1945 Yiddish literature, continuing a trend already evident in the historical novels of the two Singer brothers in the interwar period.¹⁴

The mutual influence between I. J. Singer and his younger brother has been noticed but not systematically analyzed. Key texts are I. J. Singer's novels יאַשע קאַלב (1932) and די ברידער אַשכּנזי (1936), which can be viewed as prototypes against which Singer conceived his early historical novels, שטן אין גאַרני (1933), דער זינדיקער משיח (1936) and די פֿאַמיליע מושקאַט (1945–1948). An examination of the popularity of the Yiddish historical novel, a staple of the literary supplements in Yiddish newspapers, would undoubtedly highlight the centrality of I. J. Singer in the development of this genre and its subsequent re-conceptualization in Singer's work. Moreover, I. J. Singer became a literary father figure to his younger brother, enlisting him in the world of Yiddish letters in Warsaw

14 Isaac Bashevis Singer Papers, The Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, file 104: 3.

(as proofreader of the highbrow journal *בלעטער ליטעראַרישע* in 1923) and in New York (as a contributor to *פאַרווערטס* in 1935).

I. J. Singer's sudden death from a heart attack in 1944 at age fifty led gradually to the disappearance of Singer's "anxiety of influence" with regard to his successful older brother.¹⁵ Singer, the obscure fabulist of dark tales from the already-forgotten past of Polish Jewry, might well have remained a footnote in the annals of Yiddish literature. Instead, he debuted as an American Jewish writer with *The Family Moskat* (serialized in *פאַרווערטס* from 1945 to 1948 and published in book form in Yiddish and English in 1950). Then in 1953, eight years after the story's publication in Yiddish, Saul Bellow translated "Gimpel the Fool."¹⁶ "Gimpel" catapulted Singer into the mainstream of American letters at an auspicious time for Jewish literature in America.¹⁷ The clash between post-1945 Yiddish culture's turning its back on the *goyish* world and Singer's quest to conquer it was articulated in the pages of the Yiddish literary journal *די גאָלדענע קייט* in 1950–1951. A contentious exchange took place about the viability and future of Yiddish literature between *Der Lebediker* ("one who is alive," a pseudonym of the Yiddish humorist Khayim Gutman, 1887–1961) and the Yiddish pedagogue Avrom Golomb.

Der Lebediker's article *ליטעראַטור אין דער יידישער ליטעראַטור* (Scholar and Ignoramus in Yiddish Literature) presented an iconoclastic attack on the utilitarian tendency in Yiddish literature that sought to further a particular ideological point of view. According to *Der Lebediker*, the greatest danger to the renewal of Yiddish literature was *למדנות* (scholarship), its attempt to replace aesthetic beauty and entertainment with the values of the *seyfer*, the holy book's ethical and religious qualities. *Der Lebediker* characterized this literature as "remaining stuck in its own un-artistic domain, which means Sabbath limit literature."¹⁸ Rejecting this *בעל-תשובה* tendency in Yiddish literature, *Der Lebediker* summed up his position: *צוריק צום עם-הָאָרץ! – דאָרף זײַן אונדזער רוף. זאָל למדנות בלייבן פאַר פּובליציסטן און מאַמריסטן. אונדזער שיינע זײַן אונדזער רוף. ליטעראַטור מוז זײַן כּבּל-הַגּוּיִמדיק, וועלטלעך און נאָך אַ מאָל וועלטלעך! ...* (Back to ignorance! – must be our credo. Let scholarship be for publicists and essayists. Our belles-lettres must be similar to non-Jewish literature, worldly and even more worldly.)¹⁹

15 See Norich 1991.

16 The story was published in *Partisan Review*, May/June 1953. First published as *גימפל*, "תם" in 1945.

17 See Schwarz 2008.

18 *דאָס מיינט דאָך בלייבן שטעקן אין אייגענעם ניט־קינסטלערישן תּחום, דאָס באַטייט „תּחום־שבת־ליל“*, *Der Lebediker* 1950: 141.

19 *Ibid.*: 142.

In the following volume, Avrom Golomb responded in the article *לא זו הדרך* (That Is Not the Way), referring to Aḥad-Ha'am's call for a Jewish spiritual-cultural home in Palestine in the Hebrew journal *המליץ* in 1899:²⁰

פֿאַר אונדז אַלעמען, גלייב איך, איז דאָס וואָרט „גאָלדענע קייט“ ניט סתם אַ שיינער אויסדרוק, נאָר עס איז אַ גאַנצע פּראָגראַם. אַ פּראָגראַם אין לעבן און אַ פּראָגראַם אין דער ליטעראַטור, אין אונדזער קולטור-שאַפֿונג. דאָס וואָרט מיינט פֿאַר אונדז: המשך, קולטור-המשך אָן איבעררייס, דאָס כּסדרדיקע און אייביקע... „קיבל-תורה-ומסורה“ ווייטער און ווייטער פֿון דור צו דור.

For all of us, I believe, the word “the golden chain” is not simply a beautiful expression, but a whole program of life and literature, our cultural creativity. The word means to us: continuity, cultural continuity without rupture, the constant and the eternal – receiving the Torah and the Tradition continuously from generation to generation.

Obviously, Der Lebediker's attack on Yiddish literature's self-imposed ghettoization antagonized deeply held convictions in the Yiddish world of the day. According to Golomb, the Yiddish writer was to serve as a guardian of the flock, a national hero; if Yiddish literature turned into *di goyim's* literature, it meant betrayal: *[...] היינט, אין 1950, שטייען פֿאַר מיר די „כל הגוים“ וואָס מיר דאַרפֿן זיי נעמען פֿאַר אַ מוסטער, און איך זע אין זיי איין גרויסן מיידאַנעק [...]* (Today, in 1950, the goyim on whom we model ourselves appear in front of me, and I see them as one huge Majdanek [...]).²¹

Der Lebediker's position is unexceptional in its advocacy of the independence of aesthetic categories from extra-literary ends. However, five years after the end of World War II, the Yiddish cultural world, having suffered a catastrophic blow in terms of the loss of Yiddish speakers and writers murdered in the Holocaust, was in a state of hyperactivity, traumatized and beleaguered. At that time, Singer was not only in search of God and Love – key words in the titles of the first two volumes of his memoirs *Love and Exile* (1976–1982). He was in search of a cultural arena outside the decimated remnants of survivors and the old guard of Yiddishist patriots in America, and would soon find it in English.

American Jewish intellectuals like Irving Howe and Philip Rahv were to a large extent removed from the Holocaust. They did not address its ramifications publicly in a sustained manner until the early 1960s, in the debate over Hannah Arendt's *New Yorker* articles covering the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.²² Singer's fables and supernaturalism dressed in post-modern garb were an exotic reminder of the Jewishness

20 Golomb 1951: 192.

21 Ibid.: 195.

22 See Howe 1982: 269–275 and Norich 2007.

these intellectuals had abandoned in their quest to become fully Americanized. Backed by the cultural prestige of the New York intellectuals, Singer reached the wider American cultural world through English versions of his work. In return, Singer guided some of them back to the “world of their fathers.”²³

Until “Gimpel the Fool” appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1953, Singer was virtually unknown outside the Yiddish world. At almost fifty, Singer had contributed a few original stories and novels, securing him steady employment at פּאָרווערטס. He had barely made a name for himself as a Yiddish writer and was primarily known as the younger brother of the late I. J. Singer. His meteoric rise to literary fame in America was partly due to his artistic versatility, which he had established during his decade-long apprenticeship as a professional Yiddish writer in Warsaw between 1925 and 1935. During the first decade of his literary career, Singer published literary criticism, short stories, novels, and life writing, and translated into Yiddish 11 books by writers such as Knut Hamsun, Thomas Mann, and Stefan Zweig. His four-volume translation of Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1929–1930) was praised as a major contribution to Yiddish letters.²⁴ Singer’s work as translator has yet to be systematically analyzed. It is particularly important to investigate how his Yiddish translations provided him with the tools that he would utilize after 1950 to transform his Yiddish work into American English.

Singer replicated this diversification in the different context of American culture post-1945. He published bread-and-butter journalism, middlebrow novels and life writing in פּאָרווערטס under the pseudonyms Varshavski and Segal, promoted and participated in translating his work into English, and, beginning in the 1960s, became an extremely popular performer, lecturer and interviewee.²⁵ Singer’s best work was published in Yiddish journals and newspapers under the name Yitskhok Bashevis. His prolific output as writer and cultural figure enabled Singer to achieve financial security for the first time in his career. He pursued his literary career with a single-minded business zeal, insuring that his literary stock went up by promoting his works at public performances all over America and publishing prolifically in English.

Singer maintained his artistic independence after 1945, when many Yiddish writers were reclaiming literature as a means to extra-literary ends, lamenting and commemorating what had been lost. Even in the novel *Enemies: A Love Story* (1966) and the short story “The Cafeteria”

23 The title of Irving Howe’s 1976 book about Jewish life in New York.

24 Mann 1929–1930.

25 For a selection of Singer’s prolific output as an interviewee, see Farrell 1992.

(1969),²⁶ the Holocaust served merely as a backdrop for his grand comedy of human passions and beliefs. Singer clung to the independence of literature from any political, social and cultural ideology. In a 1955 article, the Yiddish critic Shmuel Niger pointed out the danger of political correctness for a living and breathing Yiddish literature, echoing Der Lebediker's position in קייט גאָלדענע קייט:²⁷

אונדזער ליטעראַטור, וואָס איז בעת און באַלד
נאָך די יאָרן פֿון קאַטאַקליזם געווען עפעס אַ
מין כאָר (אמת, אַ כאָר מיט סאָלאָס), הייבט
ביסלעכווייז אָן צו קומען צו זיך און צוריק ווערן,
וואָס אַ ליטעראַטור דאַרף זיין – אַ וועלט ניט פֿון
לויטער ציבור און אויך ניט פֿון שליחי-ציבור,
נאָר פֿון אַריגינעל-שעפֿערישע יחידים, וואָס
גראָבן טיפֿער, קוקן ווייטער און הייבן זיך אויף
העבער פֿונעם קהל און זיינע מינהגים און
מנהיגים.

[O]ur literature which, during and after
the cataclysm, became a chorus [in truth,
a chorus with solos], is slowly recovering
and returning to what a literature ought
to be – not only a world of community
and cantors, but original creative indi-
viduals who dig deeper, see further and
lift themselves higher than the commu-
nity with its customs and leaders.

The critical consensus has long been that the three volumes of Singer's short fiction published in Yiddish newspapers and journals (צוקונפֿט, פֿאַרווערטס and סביבה, די גאָלדענע קייט) are his most important contribution to Yiddish letters. The twelve collections of short stories published in English translation, beginning with *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* (1957) and ending with *The Death of Methuselah and Other Stories* (1988), established this body of work as the Essential Singer for a worldwide readership. The three-volume Library of America edition of his short stories in English translation, published in honor of Singer's centennial in 2004, is the most recent addition to the canonization of Singer as an American writer.²⁸

The indisputable fact remains that Singer is a universally acclaimed writer due to his prominence and visibility in English. This does not detract from his mastery of the Yiddish artistic word, or challenge his place as the last great heir to the Yiddish storytelling tradition beginning with Nachman of Bratslav and I. L. Peretz. Any serious critical engagement with Singer's work must begin with the original Yiddish stories while acknowledging that, because of their narrative and stylistic

26 Yitskhok Bashevis, די קאָפּעטעריע, in די צוקונפֿט (March–April 1968) and included in the collection מעשיות פֿון הינטערן אויוון (Singer 1982a: 43–71; English translation by I. B. Singer and Dorothea Straus in Singer 1982b: 287–300).

27 Niger 1955–1956: 8.

28 Singer 2004.

simplicity, “the spell of Singer” is eminently translatable.²⁹ Attempts by critics to view Singer’s relationship with other post-1945 Yiddish writers in terms of Cynthia Ozick’s influential story “Envy; or, Yiddish in America” (1969) have tended to overstate Singer’s difference from other Yiddish writers. In crucial ways, Singer was a remarkably normative Yiddish writer in the post-Holocaust period. His work would have been unthinkable without the classical Yiddish writers as a sounding board against which Singer could develop his iconoclastic philosophy of protest, sabotaging sacrosanct notions of humanism and modernism. As is the work of Chaim Grade, Leib Rochman, Chava Rosenfarb and Eli Schechtman, the finest Yiddish prose writers of his generation, Singer’s fiction is set in a particular part of Central and Eastern Europe – in his case, the small *shtetlekh* of the Lublin region: Yanov, Frampol, Tishevitz, Goray, Kreshev, Yosefov.³⁰ As Wolitz and Sherman write: “In his short stories, Bashevis Singer remarkably shows himself as a regionalist in the truest, fullest sense, a writer of genius who, with precision and meticulous care, uses the particular as his chief and best means of reaching the universal.”³¹

Singer’s urban locus is Krochmalna Street, the poor section of Jewish Warsaw where his father, a מורה־הוראה (rabbi authorized to answer ritual questions), conducted his rabbinical court (בית־דין־שטוב) prior to World War I, as depicted in the memoir מיין טאָטנס בית־דין־שטוב (My Father’s Court).³² In family chronicles such as the *The Family Moskat* (1950) and *The Manor* (1967), Singer recreated the narrative sweep of multiple generations of Polish Jews prior to the catastrophe. Beginning in the late 1950s, Singer began writing novels and short stories about Jewish life in America such as *Shadows on the Hudson* (1957–1958), *Enemies: A Love Story* (1966), and semi-autobiographical short stories.³³ Singer’s America serves as a screen on which he projects existential crises and internal struggles that originated in Jewish Poland. Even in the most American of his novels, *Shadows on the Hudson*, in which the protagonist Hertz Dovid Grein travels to Miami and upstate New York, Singer depicts these locations mostly through the suffocating world of the Holocaust survivors that Grein runs into in cafeterias and hotels:

The wider America with which Grein came into contact was just as complicated as he was himself. He would never understand it prop-

29 See Miron 1992 and Bloom 2010.

30 Janów, Frampol, Tyszowce, Goraj, Krzeszów, Józefów.

31 Wolitz and Sherman 2001: 224.

32 For a close reading of this work see Schwarz 2005: 142–152.

33 For a close reading of “The Cafeteria” see Schwarz 2001.

erly. American remained for him the one country in the world where people walked with their heads held high, yet he could see that behind all individual differences the eternal human tragedy remained constant.³⁴

Singer's literary career as a Jewish American writer embodied continuous change and productivity that would open up "a new vein in his work, and really a different style."³⁵ Singer's late style is characterized by a greater freedom in addressing survivor guilt, suicidal behavior, and his characters' lack of agency. However, even Singer's usual disregard for literary decorum had its limits when it came to allowing the publication of *Shadows on the Hudson* in English translation. In this novel he "lets it all hang out" in an almost exhibitionist exposure of survivors' nihilism, promiscuity and self-destruction. Singer forbade the publication of this work in English translation until after his death; it appeared forty years later, in 1998, in a translation by Joseph Sherman.³⁶

The reception of the posthumously published novel is indicative of the contradictory critical responses to Singer's work in English. In *The New York Times*, the reviewer applauded the work as revealing "Singer speaking in an unfamiliar raw and brutal voice, the grandfatherly Yiddish writer stripped of the kindly, gentle tone and the flights of the supernatural fantasy that we mostly know him by."³⁷ The novel is given the highest marks as "a startling, piercing work of fiction, a book with a strong claim to being Singer's masterpiece."³⁸ In another review in *The New York Times*, the novel is torn to shreds as "chaotic, rambling, repetitive and parochial," so unlike Singer's short stories that, "at their best, are like hard diamonds of perfection." The reviewer perceptively points to the novel having been written "on demand and for a very specific audience with very specific intellectual and emotional needs."³⁹ The Montreal Yiddish poet and fiction writer Chava Rosenfarb agreed with *The New York Times* reviewer's negative assessment that "Bashevis's work which was first published in פּאָרווערטס was usually shabby and chaotic. Only when they were published in the English version did they achieve their true artistic form."⁴⁰ Singer never oversaw the editing of the English version of *Shadows on the Hudson*, which was translated more or

34 Singer 1998: 198.

35 Dickstein et al. 2004: 118.

36 See Joseph Sherman's article about his conflicts with the publisher Farrar Straus Giroux about how to translate Singer into English, Sherman 2002.

37 Bernstein 1997.

38 Siegel 1998.

39 Ibid.

40 Rosenfarb 1992: 76.

less directly from the serialized version. As a result, the novel allows us to enter the uncensored world of Singer's serialized novels in פֿאַרווערטס with a minimum of the edits and touchups that usually improved his novels in English.

Hertz Dovid Grein, like most of the characters in the novel, arrived in America one or two decades before the Holocaust; a few, such as Anna, have escaped war-torn Europe under dramatic circumstances. Like the protagonist of *Enemies: A Love Story*, which is a more artistically fulfilled version of the same theme, Grein finds himself entangled with three women at the same time: his loyal wife, his long-time lover and his most recent infatuation, Boris Makover's daughter, Anna. Its main characters drift aimlessly, sexually and professionally, outwardly successful in America but inwardly suffering desperately over their loss of family, career, and home in the Holocaust. Their pursuit of happiness in America remains unfulfilled, trapping them in serial relationships and get-rich-quick schemes. In a few cases, they seek out the certainty of clear-cut solutions to their predicament in Orthodox Judaism (Boris Makover and Grein) and spiritualism (Dr. Margolin).

The novel succeeds in delineating the plight of the שארית-הפליטה, the traumatized remnants of the Holocaust exiled from their Ashkenazi Jewish homelands, languages and landscapes in crass, materialistic, intellectually superficial America. Less successful is the novel's character development, which – as is often the case in Singer's work – tends to devolve into caricature. Singer's particular talent lies in uncovering the deep archetypal battles between Good and Evil, the basic existential choices of modern Jews, rather than in elaborating upon the subtle aspects of their social and psychological conditioning.⁴¹

In many ways, Singer is a typical representative of the Yiddish writers exiled from Jewish Eastern Europe, refugees before or after the conflagration who lived out their remaining days writing and publishing prolifically in places like New York, Buenos Aires, Montreal, and Tel Aviv. Like the Yiddish writers Chaim Grade and Aaron Zeitlin, his survivor guilt at not having had “the privilege of going through the Hitler Holocaust” suffused his work and sharpened his deliberate exposition of desperate nihilism and self-destructive tendencies.⁴² And like other post-1945 Yiddish writers, his enormous output on the staff of a Yiddish newspaper, continued productivity and embrace of new genres until a ripe old age reflected his work's life-affirming character.⁴³

41 Rosenfarb 1992: 104.

42 The Yiddish and Hebrew poet Aaron Zeitlin displayed a similar self-deprecating, self-destructive view in his post-Holocaust poetry. See Zeitlin 2007. The quote is from Singer's author's note in *Enemies: A Love Story*; Singer 1966 (no pagination).

43 ער באַטאַנט אַווי פֿיל מאָל זײַן נעגאַטיווקייט, און מיט אַזאַ פּאַסיע, אַז עס מוז ווערן קלאָר, אַז דאָס

Singer's work is intrinsically woven into the web of Yiddish cultural politics, personal relationships, various newspapers and journals from *rekhte* to *linke* (politically right and left) in which the shrinking group of Yiddish writers and קולטור-טוערס (cultural activists) fought each other in the uphill battle against assimilation and oblivion. American letters in the postwar period, which provided a fertile ground for young Jewish writers, enabled Singer to break out of the increasingly ghetto-like character of Yiddish in New York to become a major player on the American literary stage. The post-9/11 era has actualized aspects of Singer's work that highlight moral issues (e.g., 'the axis of evil'), nihilism, and the threat of religious and political fundamentalism. The celebration of his centennial in 2004 and the jubilee edition of his short stories by the Library of America – Singer is the only Yiddish writer to be so honored – indicate that his literary star is unlikely to dim any time soon.

The 1967 story "My Adventures as an Idealist"⁴⁴ is vintage Singer in its bittersweet self-portrait of the artist as middle-aged man exiled between languages and cultures. The mysterious Sigmund Seltzer, the narrator's sparkling alter ego, has commissioned the narrator to translate his ghostwritten autobiography from German into Yiddish. Like Singer, the narrator has translated Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* into Yiddish. The narrator continues to expand the work into a work of fiction with autobiographical traits that he is unable to complete (like Singer himself was unable to complete his own autobiography). The meaning of Seltzer's life becomes tied to his quest to get his ghostwritten autobiography published. Visiting the dying Seltzer in the hospital, the narrator closes the story with this prescient observation about literary posterity:⁴⁵

Our eyes met in silence. His hair had become white and sparse, his forehead higher. An expression of gentleness and wisdom I had never seen before shone in his eyes. He half winked, half smiled, as if to say, I know everything that you know, and a little more in addition. He was no longer the Sigmund Seltzer I had known all these years, but a sage

פֿאַרקערטע איז דער אמת. און וואָלט ער באמת קיין שום ליכט נישט געזוכט, וואָלט ער געדאַרפֿט זיין קאַנסעקווענט און באַגליין ליטעראַרישן זעלבסטמאָרד, בכלל אויפֿהערן צו שרייבן, ווייל יעדע פֿאַרעם פֿון שעפֿערישקייט, ווי ייאַושדיק זי זאָל נישט זיין, איז אין זיך אַליין אַ פֿאַרעם פֿון זאָגן יאָ צום לעבן און צום מענטש. (He emphasizes many times his negativity, and with such passion, that it becomes clear that the opposite is the case. And if he had not sought any light he would have been consistent and committed literary suicide, stopped writing, because every form of creativity regardless of its despair is in itself a way of saying yes to life and to man.) Rosenfarb 1992: 102.

⁴⁴ Singer 2004 (3): 745–758. First published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, November 18, 1967.

⁴⁵ Singer 2004 (3) 758.

purified by suffering. He stared at me with a look of fatherly affection and murmured, "In the end what remains after us writers? Nothing but a bundle of paper."

The story was originally published in Yiddish as דער מחבר (The Author) in פֿאַרווערטס in 1965, and did not appear subsequently in any short story collection. This was probably due to the cartoonlike lack of character development with which it demolishes the myth of the Author and his Original Creation. Like Selzer's autobiography, which is pieced together by ghostwriters and translators, Singer's English oeuvre, which lifted him out of obscurity in America, was the result of an auspicious collaboration of publishers, translators and editors.⁴⁶ Ever the professional writer and son of a Hasidic *rebbe* in Warsaw, Singer did not harbor any illusions about the Yiddish word's longevity after its severance from Hebrew Scriptures and religious law (הלכה) as a result of the rise of the השכלה (Jewish Enlightenment) in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. In an article in אַלגעמיינער זשורנאַל in 2006, Rabbi William Berkowitz, a close friend of Singer, told how his son had approached the writer and asked him to inscribe the book שבוחי הר"ן, a Hebrew volume in praise of Nachman of Bratslav:⁴⁷

When Singer took the book his hands were trembling. "I don't know," he said, "I'm not worthy of inscribing anything in this book." My son insisted and he wrote *This book was written by a great human being. There never has been nor is there anyone like him.*

Singer had internalized the distinction between what was traditionally viewed by his Hasidic father as a ספֿר (a holy book in Hebrew), and his own work, די יידישע ביכלעך (Jewish/Yiddish secular books).

Singer closed the Yiddish literary canon in the second half of the twentieth century while devising a life-raft for his work in English translation. He created a new readership for his work in America without cutting his umbilical cord to פֿאַרווערטס and its readership. Traces of Singer's Old-World storytelling, supernaturalism, nihilism, and depiction of the שארית-הפליטה are evident in the work of Jewish American writers like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, Steve Stern, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, Dara Horn and Jeremy Rothenberg, among others.⁴⁸ His work remains a vital bridge between the last flowering of Yiddish literature after the Holocaust and the rise of a new Jewish literary center in North America.

⁴⁶ Stavans 2004: 63f.

⁴⁷ Berkowitz 2006.

⁴⁸ See Ozick's, Foer's, and Rothenberg's appreciations of Singer in Stavans 2004.

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