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Introduction

HOW CAN ONE RECONCILE the young writer’s fierce denunciation of politicians for enslaving mankind and prostituting the artist with the same writer’s churning out his own dime store novels and yellow sheet journalism in weekly installments? How to reconcile the novelist who, in 1945, began to chronicle the demise and destruction of the East European Jewish family with the fanciful storyteller who told of a Jewish family’s miraculous rescue and revival that very same year? How could such an outspoken reactionary have ever become the darling of the liberal and left-of-center literary establishment and how could someone so thoroughly steeped in the language and culture of Polish Jewry have become the bête noire of professional Yiddishists?

Indeed, reading the complete works of Isaac Bashevis Singer can be a bewildering experience: the brilliant artistic manifestos that he published in little magazines on both sides of the Atlantic; the piquant pieces he ran each week in the Forverts under one of his two pseudonyms; the tightly written stories alongside the self-indulgent novels; the Yiddish originals as compared to the English revisions. Then, to see him outsmart his English-language interviewers who treat his every utterance like some kind of oracle is to understand how Singer met the needs of several distinct sectors of the literary world.

Among his Wittier bon-mots is the one about Yiddish never dying, so long as students of literature have to come up with new dissertation topics. Singer’s own work, of course, will rank high on the list if for no other reason than he has left the reader so many different tracks to follow. The present selection of documents and essays follows a single scent, so to speak, and by so doing, will help uncover one lost track that may prefigure all the others.

It would now appear that there were at least two artistic breakthroughs in Singer’s career, and both were marked by the appearance of cultural manifestos. The first came in 1932 when he and his closest friend, Aaron Zeitlin,
helped found the literary journal \textit{Globus}. In this forum of political conservatism Singer published not only his first truly accomplished works—the story \textit{Der yid fun Bovel} and the romance \textit{Satan in Goray}—but also his fiercely antipolitical manifesto alluded to above. Under the innocent title of “On the Question of Poetry and Politics” (no. 3 [Sept. 1932]: 39–49), Singer condemned all politicians down through the ages for turning the human being into canon fodder and denounced with equal venom all those “virtuosi” who accompanied the hangman in his work. True artists, Singer proclaimed, “embodied the categorical imperative”; they never flinched from the sight of man’s suffering and never succumbed to the hatred of others. As Seth Wolitz’s essay on \textit{Satan in Goray} makes clear, Singer then found in Sabbateanism the exact analogy to the messianic madness that had seized the Jews of Poland in the 1930s. Past became present; anachronistic form became the vehicle for reactionary content.

But both \textit{Globus} and Singer’s career as a writer of stylized romance were short-lived. Though \textit{Satan in Goray} was published by the Yiddish P.E.N. Club and the thirty-one-year-old writer was invited to America by the Tsar of Yiddish letters, \textit{Forverts} editor Abraham Cahan, there followed eight years of artistic stagnation. The reason for Singer’s crisis is amply explained in his manifesto “Problems of Yiddish Prose in America.”1 (It has never appeared in English before nor, for that matter, has ever been reprinted in Yiddish.)

Singer discovered that Yiddish in America was an obsolescent language, limited to one aging stratum of the Jewish population and therefore incapable of encompassing the range and vitality of the American Jewish experience. On a more profound level, Singer perceived the failure of Yiddish secularism. As he phrased it so memorably in a parallel essay, “On Yiddish Literature in Poland,” “zi is geen getlek on a got un vellekh on a velt,” i.e., “Yiddish literature between the two world wars was divine without a divinity and worldly without a world to stand on” (\textit{Tsukunft} [August 1943]: 471).

Since the world had failed Yiddish writers, and since their own world had shrunk through attrition and mass defection, even before it was enclosed behind ghetto walls, it followed that the Yiddish prose writer (as distinct from the poet) had to return to the only living font: the Polish-Jewish past. There, at least, Yiddish was alive in all walks of life. And there, as Peretz had demonstrated, Yiddish was inextricably bound up with the religious tradition as well, an inexhaustible source of wisdom and symbolism (see the \textit{Tsukunft} article for the reference to Peretz). Singer called for Yiddish writers to address their concerns and modern sensibilities within this artificial setting, betraying the present, as it were, in the name of the past.

Since Yiddish was dead as a living language, it would live in the mouth of the dead; most notably, in the mouth of exceptionally learned and witty Jewish demons. In that terrible but for him so productive year of 1943 Singer came out with two of a projected series of stories from the “Devil’s Diary” (\textit{dos gedenkbukh fun yeytser-hore}): “Zeidlus the Pope” and “The Unseen.” A year later he wrote his celebrated monologue “Gimpel the Fool.”

Still, a writer had to live, and it would be many years before the \textit{New Yorker} would pay for these old-but-new stories in translation. The bread-and-butter of a Yiddish writer in America was still (and would always remain) the serialized novel. Besides, Singer was born with another debt to the Yiddish
literary tradition. By virtue of being I. J. Singer’s younger brother, and growing up in the shadow of David Bergelson, the reinventor of modern Yiddish prose, I. B. Singer, too, was obsessed with novelistic ambition. The Family Moskat was Singer’s first, and arguably, finest novel.

This novel can be read in many ways. Most profitably, Malka Magentsa-Shaked argues, it can be read in the light of Jewish literary history and in its Yiddish original. For the comparison to other Jewish family saga novels, all of them written against the backdrop of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism, reveals Singer’s debt to a particular view of history. Shaked maintains that Singer’s historical determinism and his ironic use of biblical archetypes place him squarely within the mainstream of Yiddish and Hebrew literature. Her discovery that the novel has not two but fully three different endings, depending on its language of publication, is the most dramatic proof yet of how Singer manages to have his cake and eat it, too.

When Singer’s work is studied as a whole, and when proper attention is paid to place and date of publication, not to speak of the original text, what emerges is the portrait of a popular artist. It is surely no coincidence that Sholem Aleichem, the most popular of all popular Yiddish writers, also had trouble ending his novels, and often settled for multiple solutions, depending on his audience. Like Sholem Aleichem, Singer too was a jack-of-all-trades, so that what he couldn’t do or say in one literary genre, he could do or say in another. Thus, at the very same time as Singer began to serialize The Family Moskat in the pages of the Forverts he published in the Tsukunft his mini-saga “The Little Shoemakers.” Here, in violation of all the rules, the family not only weather the storm of history, but it is the father who wins over the sons. Here, too, the story of Creation, the Flood, the Splitting of the Sea, Jonah and the whale, are invoked not ironically but as literal prefigurations of Jewish fate in modern times. In romance, everything goes and the boundaries between biblical past and American present fall away completely.

Robert H. Wolf is surely right to title his review essay “Everyman’s Singer.” While the industry of people who read and write about Singer only in English continues to thrive on grandiose claims and global connections, Wolf documents a counter-development. The ranks are growing of those, like Wolitz and Shaked in this issue and Shmeruk in one of the volumes under review, who have privileged access to the Jewish “polysystem”—to that complex of relationships that exists between Hebrew, Yiddish and the dominant cultures of the West. Within that intricate web, Singer fashioned a design that worked: open enough to allow for multiple meanings; sufficiently closed to ward off the demon of secular humanism.

What happened next is that Singer himself began to practice the art of seduction, and when his Yiddish readers proved too skeptical or too preoccupied to be trapped in the writer’s web, the demon-writer found a new pool of unsuspecting victims in the native born readers of America and still later—in their children. Imagine what a biography that would make!

Singer, then, did not become a writer for all seasons in the twinkling of an (evil) eye. What’s amazing is that he did it at all. For at a time when life is so fragmented that only in a scholarly journal can one even speak anymore of a coherent Jewish culture, it is comforting, if not downright miraculous, to have
someone living in our midst who managed to pull all the pieces together. Surely he paid a price for his universal popularity. But only purists and other academic mandarins would argue that the price wasn't worth it.

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