

By RICHARD ELMAN

The title of this beautifully written memoir of a Jewish childhood in the tiny Polish dorps of Leoncin and Bilgoraj at the turn of the last century is misleading. Jewish village life in Poland was destroyed by the Third Reich, but for Israel Joshua Singer, elder brother of Isaac Bashevis by some eleven years and his acknowledged master, it ceased to exist the moment he became aware that his impulses and the dogmas of the tribe were in conflict. In his earliest memory he recalls crying disruptively at the local ceremony for the coronation of Czar Nicholas II which his autocratically religious family were obliged to celebrate, as Czarist functionaries, even as they later obliged him to attend various *heders* and to study Hebrew with various *incompetent and/or fanatic melamuds* (Hebrew teachers).

As a young person, Israel Joshua Singer found his surroundings painful, tedious, and *drab*; he was rebellious; his mature novels which followed that rebellion are in the humanistic tradition of Tolstoy and Chekhov.

But when he sat down to write about his early years the Jewish world of Eastern Europe was perishing. Published posthumously in Yiddish in 1946 (and lovingly translated only now into good robust English prose by his son, Joseph), this memoir depicts all the richnesses and squalors of the provincial Yiddish-speaking world of *Hassid* and *Mithnagdim*, but it is also able to delineate, through a counterpoint of anecdotes about that world recalled as childhood memory, the subtle alienation of a youth, his awakening to sensuality, curiosity, and worldliness within a withdrawn pietistic rabbinic environment, and, even with gentle satiric touches here and there, the *oafishness*, *buffoonery*, and unwholesome pathos of so much of *shtetl* life.

Israel Joshua Singer was deeply and importantly a Yiddish writer who addressed himself to a Yiddish audience and imagined his fictions through Jewish experience, but he was not, like his younger brother, a maker of satanic paradoxes for whom the evils of the present world more than balance out the evils, distortions and limitations of the past. Whereas Isaac Bashevis's skeptical mysticism

Richard Elman's most recent novel is "An Education in Blood."



PHOTOGRAPH BY
CARL VAN VECHTEN

I. J. Singer, c. 1935, photographed by Carl Van Vechten.

Of a World That Is No More

By I. J. Singer.

Translated by Joseph Singer.

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tends to make a hermetic comedy of the absurd out of any human enterprise which is not spiritual in character that, obliquely enough, tends to elevate an earlier world of religious nonsense of the *shtetl* Jew and his rabbinic court (see his own memoir of childhood, "My Father's Court"), Israel Joshua Singer's interests as a writer were more immediate, experiential, and, even when historical, invested with the same immediate experiential concerns. His art is not modernist, and rarely as neurotic as that of his little brother: the opening chapter of his masterpiece, "The Brothers Ashkenazi," is a Tolstoyan depiction of historical process; the arrival of the German weavers in the town of Lodz and the coming of the industrial revolution to Poland

are the forces that will exacerbate Jewish as well as Gentile greeds.

Israel Joshua can write of the sexual frustration of a young matron married off to an aging rabbinic billy goat without making it seem as if her appetites were psychotic, or evil. Whereas the stories of his brilliantly comic younger brother play devil's advocate in a schizoid Cabbalistic-Talmudic argument over the worth or dignity of puny human beings as opposed to those other-worldly powers he can animate so sardonically, the writings of Israel Joshua are, for the most part, worldly, humane, and always open to experience.

A possible explanation for these differing sensibilities in two brothers who were so close and tended to love and respect each other as artists and

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human beings may be that whereas Israel Joshua spent his early years in the superstitious confines of the village and developed an early distaste for it as well as an appetite for the wonders of the great world of Warsaw and beyond, Isaac Bashevis grew up in a Warsaw slum and was only exposed to the sumptuous world of his grandparents' rabbinical court as a child on a visit, a truly exotic experience. A few years ago in an interview in *Commentary* Isaac Bashevis said that his childhood visits to medieval Bilgoraj were the most crucial experience in his creative development. But, for Israel Joshua, Bilgoraj and Leoncin, his childhood years in other words, were crucial only in that they represented the sort of life he was seeking to flee because it was experience he felt compelled to reject.

In his later years, even as he demonstrated such a vivid recall of his birthplace with its queer tradesman's signs, its kvass factory disgorging a substance like sour cream from all sides and its troops of small ragged hooligans, Israel Joshua was investing that same recall with an awareness and disdain for certain unhappy and uncomfortable early circumstances. To see their world as it was not the village children placed brown and green shards of Kvass bottles up to their eyes, and regularly deceived their parents about their activities. Singer's mother was the daughter of a high rabbi; married to a failure, she knew it and permitted herself to suffer and complain aloud. An intellectually gifted woman, she became an indifferent cook who despised her husband's ineffectuality openly, studied her pious books with a fanatic devotion, and prescribed for her children that such activities as running were to be considered a sin.

The Singer household was poverty-stricken; they come down in the world; Leoncin was a step down after Bilgoraj: backward, barbaric and pestilential; two of his younger sisters died of typhus; the father was respected by some and calumniated by others and virtually unemployed. They lived in the midst of a landscape but without much relatedness to it, just as those black garments even the children wore were an effort to disguise from them the fact that they had bodies. Israel Joshua describes the Singer family sabbath as a period of torture.

While his parents napped after a heavy meal (*Continued on Page 18*)

at midday he was obliged to read his "Book of Morals" and, as he points out, he grew "deeply resentful" because "The world was no pit of iniquity totally riddled with the vanity of vanities but an incredibly beautiful place abounding in indescribable joys. Every tree, every grazing horse, every foal, haystack, stork, goose and gosling called out to me and filled me with happiness and appreciation of life. I waited for my parents to close their eyes, then fled like a thief from the prison of the Torah, the awe of God and of Jewishness."

Much later when Israel Joshua Singer is taken to watch a bull servicing a heifer by another older, more worldly companion his own sensual awareness will take the form of a surreptitious commitment. He has come to know that he had lived most intensely when he was not loving God through the study of Talmud, but playing with some of the town's gentile ragamuffins, or playing peeping Tom at the Mikvah, or flirting with his Hebrew teacher's wife. Unfortunately, Israel Joshua's paranoid surroundings conspired to make such experiences seem like failures and his choices limited, yet his appetite for such intensities never waned. In the end of this memoir the Singer family moves to Warsaw and Israel Joshua will become, as one knows from other sources, a heretic, a Bohemian, a journalist, an artist.

This memoir is told simply and vividly, with the ease of a master, with wit and grace, and a marvelous richness of portraiture, landscape, and vignette. It does not sentimentalize Jewish experience in Poland, though it does memorialize it and humanize it. Without fatuous pity or righteous moralism, through a zeal for naturalistic detail and a delight in experience that animates every page, it accumulates experiences and insights until it almost feels as if the dead have been given back their lives again. ■