

SINGER OF WARSAW

IN MY FATHER'S COURT. By Isaac Bashevis Singer. Translated from the Yiddish, "Beth Din," by Channah Kleinerman-Goldstein, Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer. 307 pp. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$5.50.

By RICHARD M. ELMAN

THROUGHOUT Eastern Europe during the early years of this century, Jews formally addressed the Lord through their prayers in Hebrew, but lived on a more informal day-to-day basis with Him and all His works through Yiddish. In the little towns of the so-called pale of settlement of Russo-Poland, as well as in large centers such as Vilna, Crakow, Lodz, and Warsaw (which was then nearly a third Jewish), hostile neighbors were always threatening to fragment Jewish communal life. Living in a state of what one writer has described as "permanent precariousness," the Jews imbued their despised German dialect with so much stoicism, humility and self-mockery as to achieve a kind of exalted gallows humor.

Yiddish also came to be expressive of a oneness among Jews of all classes and nationalities; secular and religious history came to be intermixed in a popular idiom. Written in Hebrew characters, a kind of linguistic map of diaspora, Yiddish was contaminated with words and concepts from all the cultures through which the Jews had passed; it often differed radically from place to place in both vocabulary and pronunciation, but always set forth the same stubbornly held beliefs that, as a proverb has it, "the whole world isn't crazy."

To the uneducated Jewish masses, Yiddish was the sole language of trade, of law and even of radical political argument. In time it also came to serve as the argot for a literary expression that was rich in folk anecdote, lore and moral sentiment, often aphoristic, always popular, and sometimes extremely comical.

This classical Yiddish literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries abounded in types and disguises. Sholem Abromovich called himself Mendele the Bookseller; Shalom Rabinowitz became Sholem Aleichem (Peace Be With You), and I. L. Peretz used

a variety of *noms de plume*. Some say these pseudonyms were used so that writers could protect themselves from the Czar's censors; others, that it was an effort on the part of the Yiddish equivalent of Grubb Street to avoid the censure of the rabbis; and still others, that it was a secular imitation of the rabbis' own ways of gaining renown by the use of epithets like the Sage of Vilna, The Master of the Good Name, Reb Nachmann the Silly, or the Bobover, a dynasty of rabbis so named in imitation of the distinctive labial sounds they expelled while chanting.

Even today, although the once thriving folk culture of the Eastern European Jews has suffered mortal blows, the use of pen names persists. For example, "In My Father's Court," a charming and sensitively drawn memoir of a young unworldly author-to-be growing up in Warsaw, was serialized originally as the writing of I. Warshowsky in the New York Yiddish daily, *Forward*. Warshowsky, "Man of Warsaw," is the pen name of one of the last great Yiddish authors, Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Isaac Singer was born in provincial Poland in 1904 and was raised in Warsaw, where his father, a rabbi and scholar, was charged with interpreting the law of the Jews through his *Beth Din* (or rabbinical court) for a population which consisted not only of merchants, rabbis and scholars, but also proletarians, thieves and even intellectuals. In Warsaw Singer received a traditional Jewish education, and he eventually came to be infected with secular learning.

In Warsaw he served his literary apprenticeship as a journalist and translator, producing, among other works, a Yiddish version of Thomas Mann's "Magic Mountain." In Warsaw, too, Singer wrote his first novel, "Satan in Goray," about a medieval Jewish village literally turned into Gomorrah through the false messianisms of the Sabbatean movement.

Singer came to this country in 1935, and his writings underwent severe dislocations. For the greater part of his literary beginnings his audience would be restricted to those who kept the mother tongue, but, in Warsaw, this had never really been a restriction. If his later novels and collections of tales ("The Family Moscat," "Gimpel the Fool," "The Spinoza of Market Street," "The Slave," "The Magician of Lublin," "Black Friday") unavoidably came to be written in

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Isaac Singer.

Photograph by Bernard Gotfryd.

exile, against an intimate awareness of the mass murders, deracinations and other attritions that were taking place within that audience, they were also written with the implicit understanding that the language in which he was striving for stylistic mastery was a dying language.

It has been said that when a Yiddish reader dies there is nobody born to replace him. Thus, even the creation of Israel could hardly be a hopeful portent to a writer like Singer

(for there Yiddish has been repudiated in favor of Hebrew); and even after the publication in this country of Saul Bellow's celebrated translation of Singer's little masterpiece, "Gimpel the Fool," Singer continued to write in quite unmerited obscurity for many years, as the younger brother of the great I. J. Singer, author of "The Brothers Ashkenazi."

But, within the past half decade, thanks, in part, to the unstinting dedication of (Continued on Page 34)

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of Singer's childhood regularly submitted their legal and moral dilemmas to the judgments of holy men such as his father until the holocaust of World War II. Even after their observances had lapsed, they remained a part of the Jewish world, recognizing some higher moral authority.

It is as if Singer were now saying to his readers: "Let me remind you of a time when being a Jew was not simply to be a victim," but even this gentle nudging of the by now rootless and faithless carries certain rude ironies. Writing now largely to the victims, the acts of faith, simple moral toughness, holiness and courage that Singer here records were perishing even before Auschwitz, as this memoir, with its careful honesty, cannot help acknowledging.

Writing here of the humble beliefs of milkmen and laundresses, as well as of the greeds and vanities of rich rabbis and crafty lawyers, Singer may, for just a moment, seem to be obliquely invoking the world of Peretz, as his earlier published stories of devils and nymphomaniacs surely do not; but even these Warsaw pietists are shown as staggering toward their own dissolutions, in a world of transience and terror.

A touching leitmotif in this memoir, which comes in for its share of comic distortions in much of Singer's other work, is the constant dispute between his devout but rationalistic mother, the daughter of a rabbi, and his pious, scholarly father, an aspiring mystic. In Singer's early years it was still possible for these believers to haggle continually over the meaning of signs and portents without expressing any bitterness toward God, the central mystery in their lives. That mystery, according to Singer's testimony, was to betray them in myterious ways.

AS Singer's parents sought to keep the world away from their sons, Jewish law required that the world enter their courtroom to be judged for its greeds and deceits; and the young Bashevis, looking on in bewilderment and wonder, found himself contaminated by his own moral curiosity. His older brother had already become a modern man, an intellectual. Now, confronted by the Great War, eavesdropping on the calumnies of married couples and tradesmen in their disputes with one another, Bashevis also found himself questioning and doubting.

Through his parents' injunctions to study he was infected, like some latter-day Spinoza, with the very love of learning which was to cast him as a

skeptic. "The Lord is good to all and His mercies are all over his works," Singer recalls himself echoing. Then: "Was this so? Or did I mouth a lie two times a day? I must find an answer."

Though ours is probably an incorrigibly faithless age, it is wrong, I think, to judge from Singer's candor about his own skepticism that he has become a modern man, completely resolving the problems of his beliefs to the satisfaction of our agnosticism. Singer still seems to wish to believe in the possibility of holiness, depending as much upon submission to a discipline as to some sudden act of illumination.

ALTHOUGH personally wary of all dogmas, he has gone further than most religious writers in describing pious acts. For instance, it is because of Gimpel the fool's tenacious lack of guile, his simplicity, if you will, that he does not heed Satan when he tells him to urinate in the leaven; and still another early Singer character is advised by one holy man that if he cannot be a good man he should pretend, because the Almighty is not interested in his intentions. In much of his work Singer has located the contemporary neurosis in the sin of pride, in man assuming he could act as if he were a God. To Singer this is the ultimate delusion.

But in a world in which the brutalities of Vietnam assault the mind every time one picks up a daily newspaper, Singer's vision of hell on earth may eventually come to seem tame. If God is dead, he seems to be saying, the devil is not. To Singer there is a sufficiently clear relationship between the murders of modern men and the destruction of the *shtetl* so that his work reverberates beyond the lives of his doomed characters.

Singer's eroticism also exists in a theological context, and even his agnosticism demands a belief in certain otherworldly phenomena. But, when imitated crudely by the alienated young modernist, the blasphemies perpetrated in Singer's world become mere vulgarities and the acts of demonic compulsion which he describes have the force of a sterile behaviorism—a kind of Maileresque vision set in old Poland in which, as he has said, "There is no judgment and no Judge."

Through fiction Singer has tried to give us some traditional metaphors for modern man wrenched from his anchorage in the Divine. With the publication of his first volume of memoirs, he has collaborated with his alter-ego Warshowsky to recall what once was, document the loss, and in the words of the Jewish prayer for the dead, extol, hallow, magnify and sanctify it for all time.