

Introduction

The fiction in English translation of Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904–1991), winner of the 1978 Nobel Prize for Literature, has long been known to general readers and literary critics alike. Less well known are the original Yiddish texts from which these works in English derive. This volume of essays attempts to resurrect, recover, and restore the authentic voice and vision of the writer known to his Yiddish readers as Yitskhok Bashevis.

From the time Bashevis's fiction first appeared in English in 1950, Yiddish literary critics have drawn attention to the differences that exist between these two strangely different corpuses of work. The English versions are generally shortened, often shorn of much description and religious matter, and their perspectives and denouements are altered significantly. A need has now arisen to pay more critical attention to the Yiddish texts, to appreciate the significant differences between the originals and the translations, and to recognize the implication of these differences for the literary achievement of their creator.

At this juncture of scholarly appreciation of Isaac Bashevis Singer's oeuvre, this book seeks to establish that the Yiddish original should be the primary source for study of the master's fictions. To be sure, subsequent translations and transformations from the original Yiddish reflect the differences of perceptions of other linguistic cultures, but they obscure—if they do not entirely eclipse—the original Yiddish creation and the uniquely Jewish culture it elaborates and interprets. Serious scholarship in any literature always starts with the original text in its original language, and the Yiddish texts of Bashevis Singer should be no exception. All the essays in this book, for the first time in the scholarly evaluation of this writer's work, are by specialists in Yiddish literature and linguistics; their studies are all based on the Yiddish originals, which have at times been rigorously compared with their English versions. These studies therefore offer a reinterpretation of the writer from a perspective not often taken and thus underscore his identity as a distinc-

tively Yiddish voice and an empowered interpreter of his own Jewish culture. This book seeks clearly to establish that Bashevis belongs first and foremost to Yiddish language and culture and only secondarily to the broad and great stream of twentieth-century American literature. Bashevis Singer's ambivalent dual position is entirely due to the surgical skills of translators, publishers, editors, and, indeed, Singer himself, who was never opposed to any changes in his English translations that would enhance his popularity among readers.

The studies published here seek to clarify the distinct Yiddish environments in which Bashevis lived, observed, and created. The textured vitality of his Yiddish-speaking milieu emerges in his Yiddish writings, whether anchored in the traditionally observant village of Bilgoray, seething through Warsaw's Krochmalna Street, swirling along the exilic blocks of New York City, or loping about the retirement community of Art Deco Miami Beach. These new essays view Bashevis from a perspective that differs from that of most earlier critics. Reading their author only in English, the majority of these earlier critics remove the writer from his Yiddish-language-based culture, make him marginal to his own linguistic milieu, construct of him an American writer of Jewish origins, and thus invent an English prose master, Isaac Bashevis Singer, out of a subsumed Yiddish writer, Yitskhok Bashevis.

By deliberate contrast, the critics in this new volume focus directly on the Yiddish culture that produced this Yiddish writer and his Yiddish works. Their essays identify Yitskhok Bashevis the man, the artist, and his culture as part of a vibrant Yiddish way of life that was massacred in its prime. Struggling on determinedly, fully aware that he is among the last voices of a Yiddish universe that had been dealt a mortal blow, Bashevis projects through his art a vision of that exterminated world, validates its existence, and offers a uniquely personal interpretation of it.

Bashevis was the pen-name he himself chose when he started writing, to distinguish his own voice and vision from those of his older brother Israel Joshua Singer (1893–1944), then still alive, famous, respected, and widely read. Unlike I. J. Singer, Bashevis writes not as an ideologue of some political persuasion, nor as a prophet with a didactic moral stance, but as an author functioning within, and drawing inspiration from, the linguistic and cultural parameters of his own Eastern European Ashkenazic Jewry—a people basically disenfranchised, but possessing an ancient heritage, a distinctive religious perspective, and a unique lifestyle.

Bashevis's personal existential condition mirrors the conflict within modern

European Jewish culture, which fractured itself between traditional religious observance decreed by its Halakhic world view and secular accommodation to Westernization. Many Jews sought to unburden themselves of intense if unsatisfactory religious practice in order to participate in the modern secularism of the surrounding majority, but they tried to do this within a Jewish *Weltanschauung*. In the newly emerged Yiddish-speaking secular culture of 1900, art as an esthetic undertaking was problematic for a significant sector of this linguistic community.

This dichotomy in Ashkenazic culture at the beginning of the twentieth century reflects the powerful inroads made by the Haskala (Jewish Enlightenment movement), imported into Eastern Europe from Germany throughout the nineteenth century. This movement encouraged modernization, secularization, and the invention of a new national identity which decentered, altered, and deflected the spiritually ideal encounter between Jews and their God to the politically real encounter of Jews joining other Jews to create a national and cultural renewal rooted in ethics, history, blood, and language.

Secularism — and its most dangerous expression, esthetic production in theater, literature, the plastic arts, music, and dance — had already established important benchmarks among Eastern European Jewry. With Abraham Goldfajn and Esther-Rokhl Kaminska in the theater, Mendele Moykher Sforim, Y. L. Peretz, and Sholem Aleykhem in literature, Mark Antokolsky in sculpture, Maurycy Gottlieb and Marc Chagall in painting, and Ida Rubenstein in dance, a *de facto* Yiddish secular culture came into being, burgeoning and expressive. Mordecai Ze'ev Feierberg (1874–1899) in his Hebrew novella *La'an* (Whither, 1899) captures the quandary of young men like Bashevis, riven by conflicting emotions over the Enlightenment and wrenched between the choices of rejecting a world of rigid traditionalism or embracing the new secular Yiddish culture with its lack of a meaningful spiritual compass.

Bashevis and his sister Hinde-Esther and brother Israel Joshua were new participants in the arguments that had long stirred their Yiddish world. Young Bashevis recognized the value of the critical appreciation of his older brother's literary work by the Yiddish readership of urban Warsaw, but his father, a rabbi and a Hasidic traditionalist, considered such secular literary performances frivolous and irresponsible, if not outright sinful. Nevertheless, Bashevis followed the path trodden by his brother and so many others of his generation and entered secular life, daring to encounter Westernization, fearful of being appropriated, yet fully con-

scious that this Western secularism masked the old/new Hellenic foe of the world as traditional Jews conceived it.

The essays in this collection underscore the primacy of Isaac Bashevis Singer as a Yiddish author by examining his own angle of vision on his culture, one that generally eschews an exclusively positivist depiction of the Ashkenazic world. Instead it emphasizes both the daily lived reality and the imaginative boundaries of that culture, drawing not only on its folk memories and mystical traditions, but also on the influences of the surrounding Polish Gentile world. Unlike such earlier Yiddish prose masters as Sholem Aleykhem (1859–1916), who with a humorist's eye lovingly portrayed *shtetl* (market town) people grappling with daily life; Sholem Asch (1880–1957), who, though he recorded the raw aspects of *shtetl* life, the roughness of urban existence, and the pain of historical vicissitudes, kept a strictly realist and neutral narrative style; or Dovid Bergelson (1884–1952), who meticulously constructed an impressionistic and symbolist style inherited from the Russian Silver Age, Bashevis moved dramatically across the literary spectrum from harsh realism to the fantastic, tapping the Ashkenazic Id, as it were, fearlessly uncovering unholy dreams and profane desires.

Bashevis could take it for granted that his Yiddish readers would follow his allusions and rich descriptions, especially in Poland, where *kheyder* and *yeshive* (Jewish religious primary school and seminary) education and heritage, no matter how beleaguered or even abandoned, still reverberated in the body of Yiddish speakers. Bashevis represents the last major resistant generation of strictly religious Polish Jewry dipping its feet for the first time into modernity. Isaac Babel (1894–1941), the master Russian-Jewish novelist, in his collection of short stories *Red Cavalry* (1926) makes the Jewish Communist narrator, Lyutov, stand in anthropological awe, trapped in a time warp, when he first encounters religious Polish Jews. Bashevis emerged from the same religious rearguard, many of whose youth sought to find an accommodation with the new. From a rearguard they would have liked to become an avant-garde. Not matriculants from the secular *gymnasia* but autodidacts of Western literature and thought, they needed both to catch up with their secular Jewish contemporaries and to outflank them with their own perspective.

Bashevis created a *nouveau frisson* in Yiddish literature because he dared initiate for his own Yiddish society a radical reactionary backlash. By the skill of his pen, he pulled into the foreground of his fiction the lurking memories, fears, and lusts quivering just behind this new Westernizing Yiddish culture, determined

to remind it of its historical uniqueness, moral concerns, and precarious reality. Deep inside the cultural volcano that was Yiddish life in Poland before the Shoah (the Jewish/Hebrew term for the Holocaust), Bashevis preserved as if in amber the ideological battles of the secularists against the religious, the assimilationists against the nationalists, and the utopians against the pessimists. He continued to dramatize these conflicts in his presentation of the survivors of Adolf Hitler's genocide, disoriented in the New World, haunted by their immediate past, struggling with the American reality, disquieted by the complex inheritance of their traditional Ashkenazic world, and inevitably still at the mercy of their smoldering human passions; all this, for Bashevis, argues for self-restraint and the recognition of human limits.

In the first instance, Bashevis wrote for and spoke to his linguistic community, the Yiddish-speaking Jews who had shared his inheritance and experienced the cataclysmic destruction of their world. In the aftermath of this annihilation, the Yiddish language and culture became the life-raft to which Bashevis and his readers clung, set adrift by a nightmare of history that overtook them and perhaps overtook even their God.

When a culture is destroyed by violent conquest—like Provence conquered by the medieval French or the Aztecs and the Incas crushed by the Spaniards—there are always some remains that endure after the ruin. Yiddish culture, utterly laid waste by genocide after World War II, experienced a last flicker of creativity in New York, in Buenos Aires, and finally in Israel. Bashevis and other Yiddish artists, certainly at that time more famous than himself, produced a few lasting works in these outposts of Yiddish life before they too succumbed. They were all haunted by an appalled awareness that they were facing the end of their language, their culture, and their world. To cite an illustration from my personal experience, I helped lift to his feet the incomparable Yiddish poet Itzik Manger, drunk in a Brooklyn stairwell, as he clutched onto me shouting, *ikh bin a dikhter far toyte*, “I’m a poet for the dead!” Each Yiddish speaker who dies, newspaper subscription canceled, marks another grain of Yiddish existence running out of the hourglass: the attrition inflicts continuous pain.

Bashevis, like many of the Yiddish writers before him, sought a bridge to another linguistic community, and he certainly desired to reach an English-speaking Jewry, the descendants of immigrants from Eastern Europe, and anyone else who would read a translated text. Such a want—if not a need—after the Shoah was

stoked as much by a sense of the historical debacle, a drive for esthetic appreciation from a larger audience, a longing for fame and immortality, as by the reality of pecuniary necessity. Of the earlier Yiddish writers, Sholem Asch could probably claim the greatest crossover success in English, for his novels and short stories were published by good houses in acceptable translations and sold well among both Jews and Gentiles. Bashevis may have had Asch in mind when he encouraged his own earliest large-scale family novel to be the first of his major works to be translated into English.

The Family Moskat appeared in 1950 in English garb, with pages and paragraphs trimmed and, more significantly, with its tonality and message altered.¹ Translations from Yiddish into English had always taken liberties by reducing descriptions, speeding the syntactic rhythms, and tightening the plot pacing. But this translation mode would in time become the means of transforming the Yiddish Yitskhok Bashevis into his English literary persona, Isaac Bashevis Singer. What appeared as the original Yiddish text in *Forverts* (Forward) or other Yiddish literary or cultural journals became significantly transmogrified in English by intense and conscious labor on the part of hired translators working with the Yiddish master. The massive success of “Gimpel the Fool,” translated by Saul Bellow in the *Partisan Review* of May 1953, established Bashevis on the American literary scene as an amazing new voice from the Yiddish. In 1955 *Satan in Goray* appeared, followed by *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* in 1957 and *The Magician of Lublin* in 1960, all in English translation. In consequence I. B. Singer’s voice in English extended, deepened, and enriched the full blossoming of Jewish-American fiction so brilliantly marked, in their time, by such artists as Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth.

Bashevis had tested himself in various genres and seemed determined to write the successful well-made nineteenth-century-style historical novel, of which *The Manor* and *The Estate* are other examples. These were generally well received in English dress. With *Enemies: A Love Story*—and the posthumously translated *Shadows on the Hudson*—Bashevis moved his Yiddish-speaking survivors to the New World, but the generic form of these later novels remains the well-made realist novel so remote from his early experimental and brilliant *Satan in Goray*. He also took to writing memoirs, *In My Father’s Court* being the most outstanding of these texts. What he serialized under his Yiddish nom de plume Bashevis in *Forverts* after 1960 tended routinely to be translated into English, and this no doubt af-

fects his choice of genre and subject matter. The Nobel Prize of 1978 confirmed his literary stature and affirmed his persona, Isaac Bashevis Singer, to the non-Yiddish world. His prize and fame derive therefore from the English translations, not from the original Yiddish texts.

When the Yiddish Yitskhok Bashevis became the English I. B. Singer, he assumed the iconic stature of a living grandfather just as, sixty years earlier, Mendele Moykher Sforim had been ratcheted upward to this rank by the newly emergent writers Y. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleykhem. Singer's translated writings and his New World persona soon became fused in American letters. The presence of Bashevis Singer undoubtedly widened the spectrum of Jewish literature in general, and provided an added resonance to American Jewish literature in particular, by revealing an Eastern European Yiddish imagination never experienced before. Earlier Yiddish writings rendered into English had presented the harsh satires of Mendele, the heartfelt but humorous folk characters of Sholem Aleykhem, and the bourgeois historical realism of Sholem Asch and Joseph Opatoshu, overlaid with a patina of nostalgia. But Bashevis Singer's texts move from the external depiction and social critique typical of these earlier writers to the inward, moral, imaginative, and speculative elements of the Yiddish cultural whole. Bashevis uses imagery and concepts derived from kabbalistic texts and Hasidic tales, as well as from materials absorbed from Slavic folklore and literature. From very early in his career, he showed full awareness of modernist multiple points of view and unreliable narrators — the diverse voices heard throughout *Satan in Goray* illustrate this perfectly.

Demonic imps and other-worldly figures populate and narrate many of Bashevis's tales, enabling the reader to experience the interpenetration of one world into another with the stylistic ease of the German Romantic tales of Achim von Arnim or E. T. A. Hoffmann. Bashevis offered his English readers what American Jewish writers could not: the authenticity and authority of the past, an intact Jewish civilization, still alive in the organic experience of the last survivors of the Holocaust. And what an unexpected past this proved to be! The tired old water-carrier and exhausted cobbler share center-stage with demonic peddlers of talismans and diabolic representatives of the *veytser-hore* (Evil Inclination); in observant Jewish households venerable rabbis succumb to *accidie* or lust in the densely populated cities of Warsaw or Lublin as easily as they do in some forsaken *shtetl* encircled by swampy Polish fields and sinister pine forests where pagan and Jewish demons

together rule the night. On his literary canvas, Bashevis paints a community in the manner of Hieronymus Bosch, forcing Jewish notables of law and business, like their more ordinary fellow Jews, into the snares of immoral enticements, teasing games, and agonizing tortures devised by Jewish demons and imps: dark folk fantasy is interwoven with mystical imagery to legitimize and authenticate a people with a place, an inheritance, and a past.

Bashevis's Yiddish texts depict an Eastern European Jewish visionary world that situates their author firmly in a Yiddish literary tradition derived from Hasidic hagiographies and a Jewish mystical legacy that moves through the *Tales* of Rabbi Nakhman of Bratslav (1815) to Peretz's Hasidic stories and Der Nister's transcendental meditations. For the non-Yiddish reader, the translated texts can appear attractive as well as exotic and opaque. They contain no assured point of reference in the familiar Western world. The same sense of defamiliarization can occur when a Western, non-Jewish viewer encounters a Chagall painting, for example, in which an artist is portrayed with a hand comprising seven fingers. To the Yiddish speaker there is no mystery: the seven fingers visually translate the idiom *mit ale zibn finger*, literally "with all seven fingers," meaning with intense creative energy. Critics who know no Yiddish and are unaware of Yiddish culture see a surrealist painting and praise the painter's fanciful and gifted imagination. Both readings are possible, but knowledge of Yiddish authenticates the one over the other.

From the time the first works of Bashevis were translated into English, a substantial number of critical and scholarly articles and books have emerged which base their prooftexts exclusively on the translations and not on the original Yiddish texts. This tradition hides behind Singer's own often-repeated comment that his English versions can serve as "a second original." Under that protective guise, the English translation is made to appear not only equal to the Yiddish original, but even canonical, for according to Singer's own public claim, restated many times, it represents his own further reworking of his literary text. Unobtrusively, the Yiddish text becomes subsumed under the English text and is reduced to an appendix if it is noticed at all. Wittingly or unwittingly, this erasure becomes an act of cultural imperialism. Through it, Yiddish language and culture is made to appear moribund and parochial, serving as a mere chrysalis from which the Yiddish writer Yitskhok Bashevis can burst forth as the full-flighted English author I. B. Singer, the Nobel Prize winner who uses English as the universal tongue that carries his universal message. Singer, of course, was never innocent of working in

tandem with his critics in this process of Americanizing him. If his motives were not ethically sterling, they were certainly grounded in the realistic recognition that his native constituency was dwindling, and in consequence he was not prepared to enter the shades of linguistic oblivion or poverty.²

In *Critical Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer*, a recent collection that brings together some of the most widely quoted critical writings published over the last three decades, the volume's editor, Grace Farrell, articulates a sophisticated position which allows a postmodernist indeterminacy to resolve the so-called conundrum of these two corpuses of work by arguing that Bashevis Singer wanted both a Yiddish version and an English version and neither therefore can stand alone.³ But this, it seems clear, is begging the question. Close comparative studies of the available Yiddish texts with their English translations reveal that the English has deliberately omitted many of the Jewish — and even Slavic — allusions. The loss of such iconic elements affects the works' esthetic value and cultural meaning. Above all, there are serious ethical implications involved in not closely following the Yiddish master-text.⁴ The English version is at best an elegant reworking of Yiddish into American English with the plain intention of gripping an American readership. Charles Baudelaire's magnificent translations of Edgar Allan Poe do not make the French version canonical any more than Friedrich Schlegel's great German translations of William Shakespeare can supersede the unsurpassable original English. Singer's work appears as the only case in literary history where it is currently argued that the translation not only can, but in reality does, assume a greater validity than the original.

The argument is then advanced that Singer himself made the translations. That assertion can now be proved to be less than accurate. Most critics agree that the single best English translation of Singer's work into English is Jacob Sloan's version of *Satan in Goray*, which, for all its elegance, pruned the text judiciously — and Singer had little hand in its transformation. Singer did indeed participate in the English versions of later texts, but much had already been prepared by his hired helpers. Singer knew English well enough as a medium of oral communication, but editors at his most frequent publishers, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, as well as those at the *New Yorker*, a magazine which for many years held the first refusal rights to all of Singer's stories in English translation, were conscientious in their continued buffing. A comparison between the earlier translations by professionals and the later translations "by committee," as it were, reveals stylistic differentiations. The

English version of *Shadows on the Hudson*, translated by Joseph Sherman, ran into difficulties at times because of publishing house rules regarding what was considered the Singer style and tonality.⁵ Cuts were made. This happens in translation all the time. Constance Garnett's splendid translations of Fyodor Dostoevsky are justly highly praised for their skilled tonality even if they do contain not only howlers but also page and paragraph condensations. The original language of the text, however, must always remain the basis of sober scholarship. No serious scholar would study the work of Dostoevsky in Garnett's English versions.

Another favorite ploy in the defense line of the primacy of the English text of Singer's writing is to deny that Bashevis has a place in the Jewish canonical tradition. Grace Farrell asserts this clearly in her introduction: "Throughout his career Singer would be criticized, particularly by scholars of Yiddish, for not continuing the tradition of sentiment [*sic*] established by that literature."⁶ This assertion can only appear as something of an impertinence when it is made by a scholar who admits to knowing no Yiddish. Even if Singer himself regularly pretended otherwise to an American readership largely ignorant of the Yiddish literary tradition, his own place in that tradition—by no means "a tradition of sentiment" in the work of its greatest exponents—was perfectly clear to himself, and his extensive borrowing from it in any number of forms and guises is the most convincing proof we have of his inextricable interconnection with it. Moreover, this is an argument that uses the old canard that if Jewish Americans say that Singer was outside the Yiddish tradition, then surely he must be. To support this position, as eminent a Jewish literary critic as Irving Howe is invoked,⁷ and a Jewish-American playwright like Paddy Chayefsky is quoted to argue that Singer is an "alien figure" in Yiddish literary history.⁸ However, it is then forgotten or overlooked that these critics and commentators are not scholars of Yiddish literature or of the literary world around which that literature revolved. These critics depended a good deal on their "advisers." Irving Howe, for example, looked to the critical sensibilities of the Yiddish poet Eliezer Greenberg for guidance, and it was Greenberg who insisted on the worth of translating "Gimpel tam" by reading it aloud to Howe and then spared no effort to convince Saul Bellow to translate this famous trademark Bashevis tale into English.

Many of the Jewish-American critics and scholars of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s knew Yiddish as a kitchen language of childhood—and some of them knew it very well indeed—but none of them were academic specialists in Yiddish. There

were no chairs of Yiddish language and literature in American universities in those days. Indeed, Jewish Studies per se hardly existed on American campuses. Consequently most critics and commentators of these decades read and wrote about Singer in English, using the published English translations of his work. Very few — perhaps a handful — obtained copies of the Yiddish originals they wrote about. Significantly, most of Bashevis's Yiddish texts existed only in newspaper columns, for — remarkably enough — he permitted few of his Yiddish texts actually to be published between hard covers.

Most of the so-called Yiddishists whose opinions are invoked to judge Bashevis's place in "the Yiddish literary tradition" were Yiddish newspaper critics and Yiddish writers of *belles-lettres*. They were rarely professional academics. At best there were Jewish professors of English or German, like Joseph Landis or Eli Katz, who had a solid scholarly control of the Yiddish language and its literature. In general the most vocal Yiddishists were a polemical lot who recognized Bashevis's strong points but did not pull their punches in exposing what, from their perspective, they regarded as his weaknesses. But among them there was no unanimity of hostility — on the contrary. If Yankev Glatshteyn, the distinguished modernist Yiddish poet, was less than pleased with Bashevis's writings, Judd Teller, another modernist poet, admired his art. In the introduction to her book, Farrell has set up the "Yiddishists" as straw men, and she obtains their putative negativity from critics whom she has read only in English. In short, Farrell has heard only one side.⁹ The ignorance and dismissiveness expressed by English-language critics who have read neither Bashevis in the original nor his critics' analytical essays in Yiddish reveal a cultural arrogance and a transparent appropriation of Singer's oeuvre that has now been made part of English-language-based American literature. It is regrettable, to say the least, that the subtext of this process seems to suggest that English-language critics were saving this supreme Yiddish writer from a Yiddishist crucifixion.

We can now appreciate all the more the importance of this collection of essays, for this is the first assemblage of texts in English by academic specialists in Yiddish language, literature, and culture. The scholars who wrote these papers are professionals, Jews and Gentiles alike, who live and work in many different countries, but who are all committed to the serious study of Yiddish culture and its institutional expression at their respective universities. They are not ideologues of Yiddishism, nor propagandists for their own ideological persuasions. Rather they

are academics who share a deep interest in the Yiddish texts of a master Yiddish writer, Yitskhok Bashevis. Most of them have already published essays and larger studies on his works and related subjects. They do not have a hagiographical vision of the writer: they are all fully aware of the controversial aspects of his oeuvre. They all know both his Yiddish originals and their English translations and have engaged with the problematics these different texts raise. Some have written on his biography, others on his bibliography, and most of them on his works and their relationship with the surrounding environment in which they were produced.

In this volume the essays have been arranged in five sections that permit different angles of vision and frame the intellectual problematizations of Bashevis's achievement:

1. The Yiddish language and the Yiddish cultural experience in Bashevis's writings
2. Thematic approaches to the study of Bashevis's fiction
3. Bashevis's interface with other times and cultures
4. Interpretations of Bashevis's autobiographical writings
5. Bashevis's untranslated "gangster" novel.

The first section brings together essays which consider the accomplishment of the writer in his native tongue and the culture from which he derives his material. Each of these essays highlights some aspect of the differences that occur when the original Yiddish text passes into English translation. Irving Saposnik's elegiac essay, "A Canticle for Isaac: A *Kaddish* for Bashevis," confronts the question of cultural difference as posited in its very title. He argues suggestively that the English variant "served as a commentary on the original." Joseph Sherman, in his study, "Bashevis/Singer and the Jewish Pope," uses the short story "Zeidlus the Pope" to illustrate the significant differences that occur when the Yiddish text is performed in English dress. In this persuasive analysis, the English text is shown to vitiate the complexity, everywhere present in the Yiddish text, of Bashevis's questionings and doubtings. In "History, Messianism, and Apocalypse in Bashevis's Work," Avrom Noversztern explores Bashevis's political engagement with the messianic and apocalyptic motifs prevalent in much modern Yiddish literature, in work he wrote immediately prior to and immediately after the Shoah. From a linguistic perspective, Mark Loudon, in "Sociolinguistic Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer," notes the significance of the artist's attitude to Yiddish in all its registers and the

richness of their incorporation into the dynamics of text. In Bashevis's hands, Yiddish emerges as a remarkably subtle instrument incapable of being transmitted in English translation.

The essays in the second section focus on key themes in Yiddish culture and the ways in which Bashevis interrogated these themes in his writing. Leonard Prager, in "Bilom in Bashevis's *Der knekht* (The Slave)," explores the role of animals, especially dogs, in Yiddish culture. Prager uses theme, role, and metaphor to study Bashevis's handling of the way fear of dogs traditionally affected Jewish-Gentile relations and became a pivotal signifier in defining Jewish accommodation to the Gentile world. Alan Astro's study, "Art and Religion in *Der bal-tshuve* (The Penitent)," analyzes what is probably the most controversial of Bashevis's novels to point out that Bashevis may permit a mockery of the esthetic condition by the "penitent" who is the novel's virtual monologist, but that in the end he validates the centrality of art for the modern Jewish condition. In "'Death Is the Only Messiah': Three Supernatural Stories by Yitskhok Bashevis," Jan Schwarz expresses his disappointment with Bashevis's static world view and the passivity of his characters across forty years of writing. By studying the theme of death, Schwarz perceives Bashevis as a Wandering Jew figure whose passive, exilic condition leads himself and his community to a doom without restitution.

The third section recognizes the historical and intercultural forces which affected not only the whole of Yiddish culture but the singular art of Bashevis. There has been a tendency to treat Yiddish culture in general, and Bashevis's work in particular, in isolation, but the present studies set in clear relief the importance of time and place for a work of art and the straddled culture from which it emerges. In "Bashevis's Interactions with the *Mayse-bukh* (Book of Tales)," Astrid Starck-Adler reveals the interface between Old Yiddish stories in the often-reprinted *Mayse-bukh* (1602) and Bashevis's reworking of some of these medieval *topoi*: first, the marriage of a demon with a human being in "Taibele and Her Demon"; second, dybbuk possession in "The Dead Fiddler" and "Two Corpses Go Dancing"; and third, the Jewish pope in "Zeidlus the Pope." This study appreciates both consonances and incongruities between the texts, to prove that Bashevis read and drew from a great deal more than simply Hasidic materials or current Yiddish, Polish, and German novels. Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska's essay, "The Role of Polish Language and Literature in Bashevis's Fiction," provides us at last with examples and proofs of what Singer read and learned from Polish language, fiction, and cul-

tural life. This essay posits that the Polish cultural realm holds a significant place in understanding the works, the writer, and Polish-Yiddish culture itself.

Part four of this book explores the place of autobiographical writing in Bashevis's life and works, an exploration that offers a unique penetration of the Polish-Yiddish world. Many readers and critics have been led to believe that Bashevis began to compose such efforts late in life, but Nathan Cohen in "Revealing Bashevis's Earliest Autobiographical Novel, *Varshe 1914–1918* (Warsaw 1914–1918)" proves that this work, partially published in 1936 in a Yiddish newspaper in Poland, contains many of the first accounts of incidents in Bashevis's boyhood that would later be reworked and developed in his autobiographical writings like *In My Father's Court*, in his fictions such as *Shosha*, and in such short stories as "Menashe and Rachel" and "Growing Up." Itzik Gottesman explores the representation of Bashevis's Yiddish-speaking world through the folklore lurking on every page of his memoiristic writing in "Folk and Folklore in the Work of Bashevis." The interplay of religious high culture and folk culture living in tandem in the Singer family apartment on Krochmalna Street in Warsaw provides rich insights into the complexity of a traditional culture encountering the harsh winds of change. Janet Hadda, whose recent comprehensive biography of Bashevis Singer explores his complex psychological life choices, interprets a central moment in Bashevis's creative life in "Bashevis at *Forverts*," the New York Yiddish newspaper in which he published most of his literary works. Bashevis found himself in a bitter battle with Abraham Cahan—the powerful editor of *Forverts* and the author of the seminal novel of immigrant Jewish life and acculturation in America, *The Rise of David Levinsky*—over the serialization in *Forverts* of Bashevis's first major novel written in the United States, *Di familye mushkat*, of which Cahan did not approve. By sticking to his convictions, Bashevis prevailed, but this clash was psychologically not without cost.

The collection concludes with a newly translated chapter from a novel by Bashevis that has never been seen in English before. This novel, serialized in *Forverts* between January 1956 and January 1957, is Bashevis's own unique reworking of yet another well-established genre in Yiddish fiction: the "gangster" novel, which has a long and interesting history in the modern Yiddish literary tradition. In this novel, Bashevis demonstrates once more his easy familiarity with the tradition from which he emerges, and to which he repeatedly returns for models that he subverts or parodies in his own original way. This novel, partly in holograph and

partly in published instalments from *Forverts*, forms part of the extensive Singer Yiddish archive that was acquired for the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center by Robert King when he was dean of liberal arts at the University of Texas at Austin.

This collection of essays, therefore, offers an entirely fresh focus upon the man Yitskhok Bashevis and his oeuvre. It does not deny the valuable insights to be found in earlier collections such as Marcia Allentuck's *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1969), Irving Malin's *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1969), David Neal Miller's *Recovering the Canon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1986), Grace Farrell's *Critical Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1996), and many other fine studies by individual authors. This volume, however, unlike any other, focuses on the Yiddish text as the proof-text and studies the work, its author, and its readership from the perspective of Yiddish culture. All serious literary scholarship treating Isaac Bashevis Singer and his writings must surely henceforth consult and be cognizant of the Yiddish language he wrote in, the Yiddish culture he wrote about, and, above all, his own Yiddish text. The English versions may be "a second original," but they are simply that—a second. The Yiddish locks in the real text, the key text, the masterpiece.

Seth L. Wolitz
University of Texas at Austin

Notes

1. Irving Saposnik, "Translating The Family Moskat," *Yiddish* 1 (Fall 1973): 26–37.
2. His contemporary Khayim Grade, the poet and novelist of Vilna, called me personally at least three times, insisting that I translate his work. Cynthia Ozick wrote a powerful short story on this painful topic: "Envy: or Yiddish in America" (1971).
3. Grace Farrell (ed.), *Critical Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), p. 20.
4. See, for instance, Seth L. Wolitz, "Der yid fun bovl: Variants and Meanings," *Yiddish* 11:1–11:2 (1998): 30–47.
5. Personal communication, Joseph Sherman, March 10, 1999.
6. Farrell, *Critical Essays*, p. 2.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 23, n. 23.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

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יארמע און קיילע

צ'אק באשעוויס זינגער
Copyright: Isaac Bashevis-Singer

(פארעצונג)

קאָפּירעכט פּאַר 1911

1

יארמע האט געהאט געבראכן די שבעה, ווען קיילע האט זיך אויסגעניכטערט האט זי ביטער געווינט פאר אים, געקושט זיינע פיס און געשווארן זי איר טויר טער מאמען און אז אייב ער'ס איר נישט מוחל זיין, ווען זי גלייך אוועק צו דער קאלשער באן און זיך ווארפן אויף די וועלט, קיילע האט זיך געראטן זיך געלאזט מיטן קאפ אין דער וואנט, דאס פנים איר'ס אלן געווארן פארוואונדט מיט טרעה, גראבן זי אבא, ווען יארמע האט זי צום טוך אריינגען געזען איז בעט, האט זי אים בא' וויזן אז ער ווייסט נאר נישט אים אירע קונדשקייטער ווי אזוי איר'ס צווייגן און באהיידען א מאנט ביל, יארמע האט זי געפרעגט ווער ס'האט זי אויסגעלערנט די אלע סאלמוזן און קיילע האט אנגעטוי פער געזען פון אלפאנט, גנבים, און פון א טרעפער וואס האט גע' האט ביי זיך אין שטוב א שווארצן שפיגל און ער האט געוויזן אים אים זעענשאלט פון פארלירענע מאנען, געליבעט, ווי איר פון טיר' זען וואס ווילן זיך באהעפטן מיט יענע וואס בעקען נאך זיי, זיי האט געזענדט אויבן ווילע רייך און דערצייילט אויבן געוואלישע מעשה'ס און יארמע'ן איז יעדעס מאס אדורך א שוידער דורכט רומ'ן ביו, ווי אזוי האט ער געקאנט אויעקווארפן אזא אייבע, ער האט ביי זיך אפגעפאסט אריינגעוויזן צום מודה הודאה און זיך לאזן מתיר- נאר זיין.

יארמע האט שטילטעך מאל זיך געהאט געטרעפן מיט דעם לאמען מאס, און וויראווייל מאס האט אים אנהויב געזענדט און ער האט זיך אראפגעקאפט קיין פוילן גלאס און, צו נאכאן א בליק אויף די אל' טע נאס און שטעלער און זיך צו טרעפן און באשקליען גוטע בריי' דער האט זיך ביסלעכווייל ארויס געוויזן און ער האט פלענער זיך אויסגעשלאגן די הנצח'ים און אפ' שער אויך צו מאכן גרויסע געשעפט, אין בויען אריינ, און איר ער זשאנעריע, אין גאנץ דרום'אמערי' ער האבן אויסגעפילט נכבא'ס און מיט האט זי נכבא'ס אימפארטירן פון אירראפע, אין די אריינגען האט

מען געשריבן אז הענדלער פון וויי' ס'ס שללאפן פארן ארום מיט קעטשילעך, כאפן אויף מיידלעך, פארנוואלידיגן זיי און פירן זיי אוועק אין די ווייטע נקמות גע' הונדערט אין קייטן, אבער דאס זע' נען אפ'ל, האט מאס גע'טענה'ט, אויסטראכטענישן פון די שרייבער' לעך, ווי אזוי קאן מען גנב'נען דערוואסענע פרוען? ווי אזוי קאן מען, קעגן זייער ווילן, זיי פיר רען איבער דער גרעניץ, אין שיפ'ן באקעס, שפאנגעס! די מידן מוזן אליין וועלן, א לייטשער קא' ליערמאכער קאן פארפירן אזויפיל נכבא'ס וויפיל ער וויל, אנדערע ווארטן בלויז מ'זאל זיי מילאמ' פערשעס פארפירן, זיצענע נייע צייטן, נכבא'ס האבן די אייגענע אפגעטויזן וואס מאנגלייט, זיי ווילן נישט תהנה תהבו מיט שמענדרי' קעס, טראגן און האבן, פארלירן די בעסטע יארן מיט וויקעלעך און ווינדלעך, מאמעסען און צאפער' לעך, מ'דארף בלויז וויסן ווי אזוי צו ערנן צו זיי, מאס האט פאר' געשלאגן אפגעוויזן א פלאן, ער האט גע'יאילט אן די רויטע קיילע זאל צוטייטן צום עקס, זי האט א פיסק אויף שוויפן, אין אומגעפער וואלט זי געקענט שארן גאלד, יארמע האט געפראוואט זאגן אז ער וויל קיילע'ן פאר זיך, נאר מאס האט גע' טענה'ט.

כ'לעב, יארמעלע, די דרעטס ווי א שפאנגע, מ'קאן קיינעם נישט האלטן פאר זיך, אפילו א רביצין האט באלד תהנה ווען איר מאן, דער רבי, מאכטען אז איר, מ'קאן אזוי האלטן די רויטע קיילע און שטוב און זי לאזן פירן די ווירשטאט און זי צערעווען דעם מאנ'ס שקארפעטן ווי מ'קאן איינ' שפאנען דעם ווינט אין פעלן, ביסלעכווייל אין מאס ארום מיט זיין פלאך.

מאס האט געהאט געליינעט אין אן אַמעריקאנער צייטונג א גע' שטיכט וועגן א פארשייטע וואס האט זיך געמאכט אירע ביזנעס תהנה צו האבן מיט רויכע מענער און נאך דער תהנה ביי זיי ארויס צויליכטען אירע אויסגעזאגן די פארמעגנס און זיי האט גע'צויזן, די נכבא'ס אריינגעצויז' גען אין איר נעץ טונאן אזוינע פרייערע, געווארן שטיין רייך, וואס מ'קאן אלץ אן אמעריקע, קאן מען איר טאן דאס אין פוילן, האט

מאס גע'טענה'ט, א סך אידן דא זענען געווארן שטיין רייך, א פאר' שונטע ווי קיילע מיט איר רייך, מיט איר מענהליטשן וואלט געקאנט פאררדייען דעם קאפ זי גרעסטע חכמים, אין דער צייט וואס מאס און יארמע וואלטן קאליע געמאכט א פאר טוך מודן און זיי צוגע' גרייט צו דער נסיעה קיין דרום א מעריקע, וואלט קיילע לייכט גע' קאנט אריינגעווארן וועלעך הונדערט טויזנט רובל, אדער א סך מער, מיט אזא סעם רומע וועלט וואלט זיי שפעטער אלע דריי געקאנט אויפ' שטעלן אין ארגענטינע, בראזיל, באליוויא, אורוגוויי די גרעסטע בארדעל, זעבן ווי די קסריים, ס'קאן אפילו זיין אז ער, יארמע, און ער, מאס, וואלטן געקאנט פאר איינוועקס תהנה האבן מיט א פאר רייכע מאנ'ס/א אידער זיי פארן אויבער מיט דעם טראנס' פארט אויף יענער זייט ים, מאס האט געזעדעס:

— יארמעלע, גאלד וואלנערט זיך אין די גאסן, מ'דארף בלויז וויסן ווי אזוי דאס אויפצולויבן, כ'בו רייך זיך וורח, כ'קאן שוין, אויב כ'וילן, מיר קויפן א פאלאץ און לעבן ווי א פרישע אבער מיט אין גוט אויך דער עלטער, נישט אין מיינע יארן, איר קאן נישט רוקן, דער האבער שטעכט מיר, כ'מוע פעסע טאן, ווען נישט ווער איר פארשלאגען און נעם טראנס'ס הרויח, יארמעלע, די ביזנס בעקער טען פון דעם אייגענעם טייג, און כ'האב אויך זיך געטאן איין קוק יענע אסט אין טראסער, האב איר געוואוסט מיט פון ווערן שות' פיס, זיי קיילע און אן אצור, פ'ה'פאך!

— וואס ווילסטו, מיר זאלן ווע' רען א דרייילינג? — ס'מוז ניש' זיין, כ'בין, חלילה, נישט אויסגענוגערט, כ'בין געפארן מיט דער שוף ערשטע קלאס פון ריא קיין לאנדאן, און ווען איר זאל דיר דערציילן וואס כ'האב אויסגעטאן אין די צוויי וואכן איר פיס, זי וואלטן מיר גע' האלטן פאר דעם רויכטן שפאקער, ברידערל, מ'דארף קיין שום אויסציי' גיין צו זיי מיט קיין שום אויסציי' דער איר גייען באלד צום פסוק: אויך-אויך-אדער, זי געפעלעס מיר, כ'בין אליין און א קאנצע, זי נאך כ'האב זיך דערנען ביזנס מיר באלד געפעלן, ווי שטייט עס דאשט אן פר: אל תרבה שיה עס האיקה.

יא, יא, כ'קאן — האט יארמע געענטפערט.

— וואס מיינטסטו? מ'האט אויך מיר רחמנות? — אלץ צוואמען.

— וואס אלץ? — זיינו פיס, דו קאסט איר בערענדן א שטיין.

יא, יא, דאס איז א סארט — ווי רופט עס זען? — מאגעניסיום, אויב א מאגעס קאן צוציען א שפילקע, פארוואס זאל א מאנסיקל נישט קאנען ציען א יאלדעוועק? מ'דארף בלויז דערלאנגען דאס ריכטיקע לשון, מיר דריי וואלטן איינגענומען א וועלט.

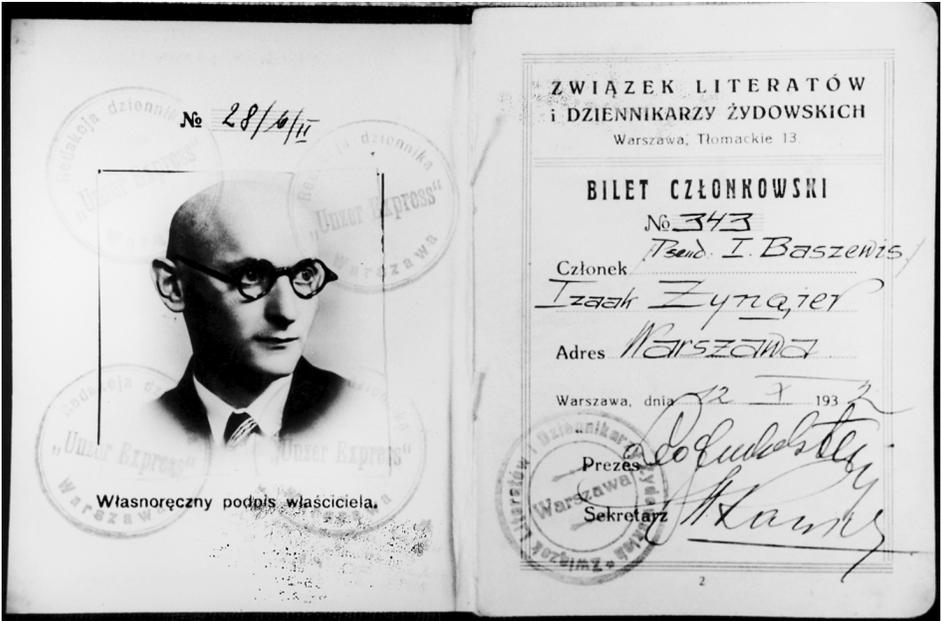
מאס האט געזענדט מיט יאר- מע'ן ביי א גלעזל קאווע מיט עסען קובן אין דער מלינה נומער זעקס, שפעטער אין קאפען ביי לודס', דערנאך ביי סאמארעני' אויפן יארמע-פלאץ, באהאנט האט יארמע אלץ אבערעגעבען דער ריי טער קיילע'ן אין בעט, אין אנהויב האט קיילע גע'טענה'ט, זיין און הונדערט מאל גיין זי, קיילע וויל מער נישט קיין אנדערע, זי וויל איין גאס און איין יארמע, אבער יארמע האט גע'טענה'ט:

— ווי לאנג קאנען מיר דא יצא אויך קראכמאלנע נומער און יצא טערן איבער יעדן גראשן? קרעפ' לעד ווערן איר צוגעגעבט, בארני צעמקע ווערן איר נאסא, ווארשע איז א קליין שטעטל, ווידער די קראכמאלנע און ווידער די סמא' טשע, ווידער די סטאוועק און ווי דער די וועק, ס'בעמט קריכן פון האלד, דאס אמעריקע איז א נייע וועלט, לאפאצאנעס זענען אוועק פון פוילן און געווארן אן אומגע' מיליאנערן, מ'דארף נאר דא אייניג קריגן די ערשטע פאר טויזנטער, דערנאך גייט אלץ ווי געשמירט, — וואס וויל ער מיר אלץ טאזן? — האט זי געזענדט.

— מאס ד'דאח, ער'ס אייניג לייגן געלט אין געשעפט, ער וויל זיך אויסקליידן און א פרינצעסין, ער וויל מיר וויל וואוינען אין א האטעל.

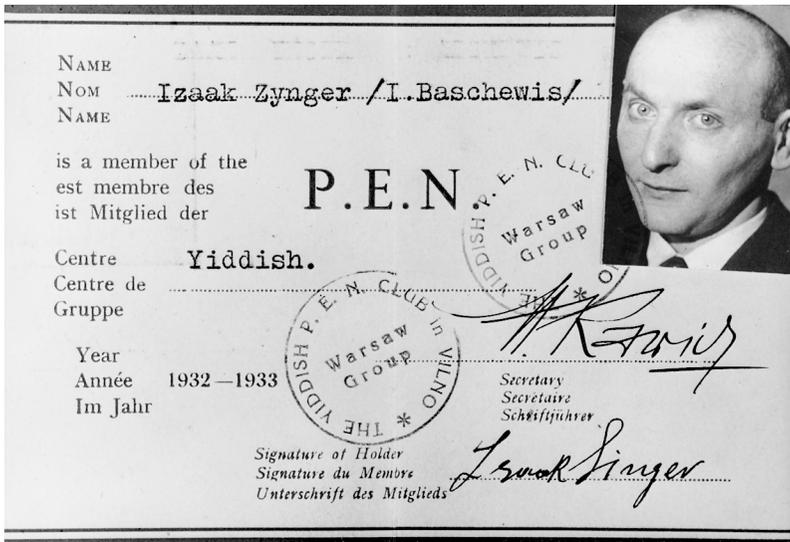
(פארעצונג — פארט)

Warsaw Literary Club card, 1932.



Courtesy YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and Monika Garbowska.

Yiddish P.E.N. Club identification card of 1932.



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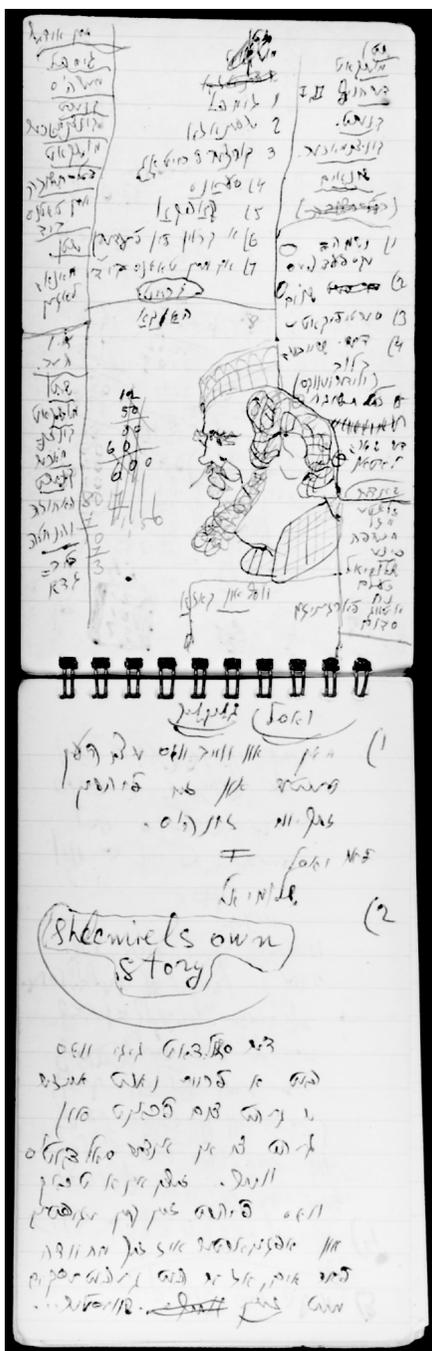
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Delivré à **M. I. H. ZYNGER**
à toutes fins utiles.

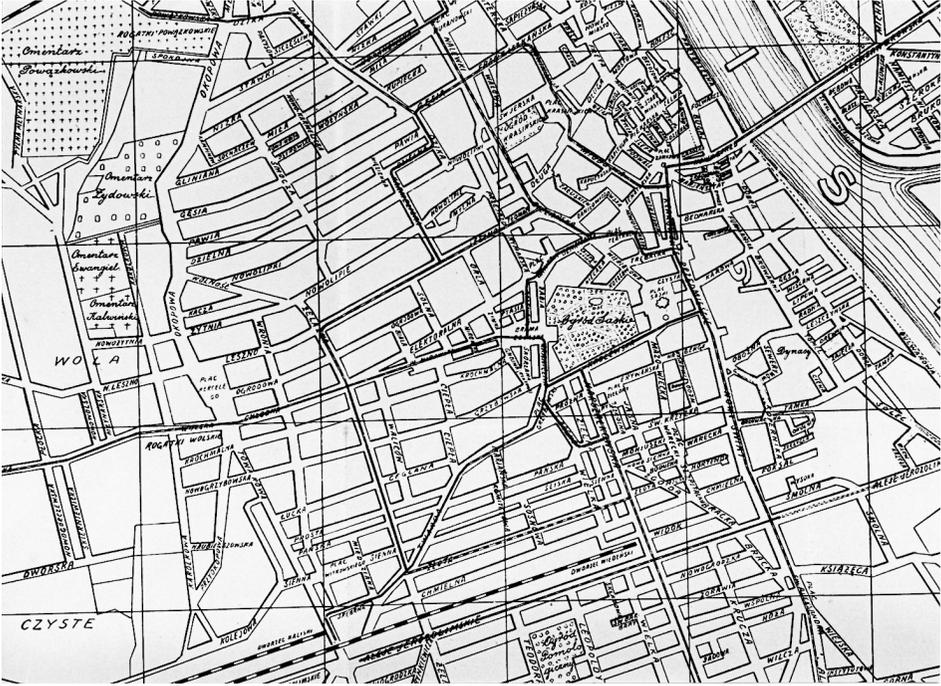
Signature du titulaire :

I. H. Zynger



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

Jewish quarter in Warsaw, before 1916.



Courtesy Monika Garbowska.

Krochmalna Street, Warsaw, 1934. This street, where Bashevis Singer's family lived in great poverty, was also known for its streetwalkers.



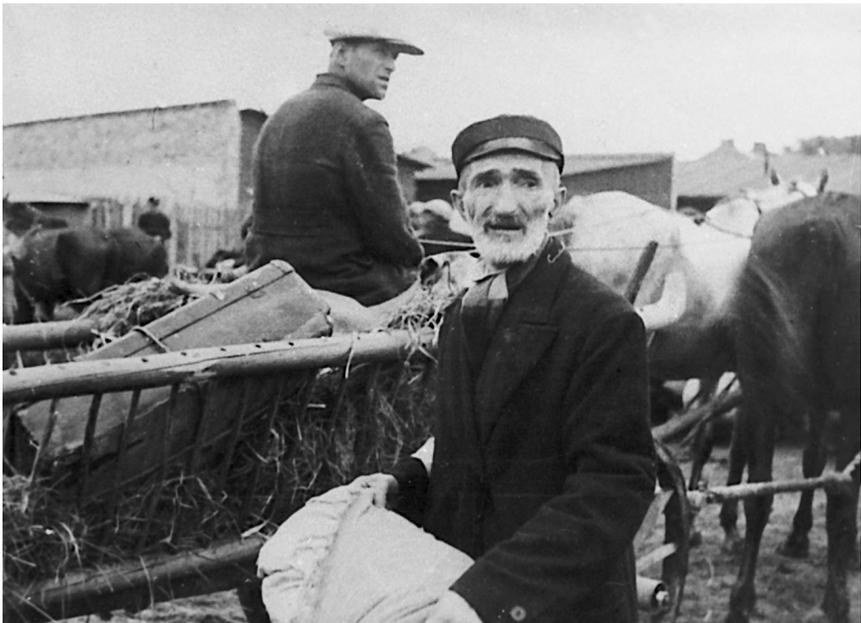
Photo from D. Kobielski, *Warszawa międzywojenna* (Warsaw between the wars), Warsaw: 1969. Courtesy Monika Garbowska.

The house of the Kotsker rebbe, Kock.



Photo by A. Trzcinski. Courtesy Monika Garbowska.

A local Jew standing next to a peasant seated on his wagon in Bilgoraj, 1942, before the liquidation of the ghetto of this town in which Bashevis Singer was born and grew up.



Courtesy Museum of Bilgoraj and Monika Garbowska.

Jewish cemetery in Frampol (just north of Bilgoray), 1985. Singer places two of his stories in this town.



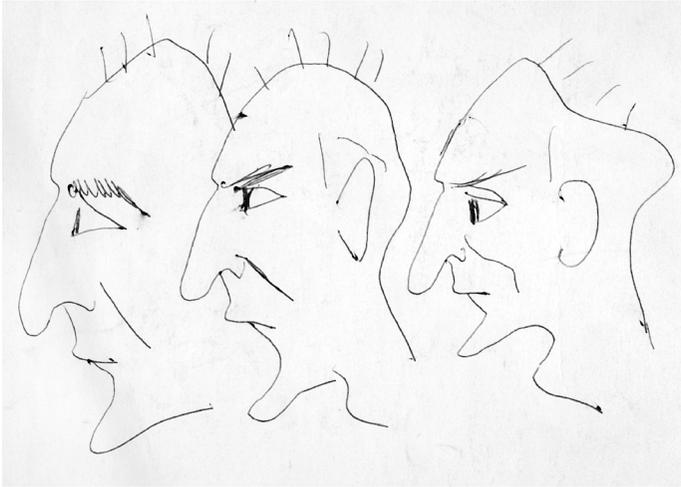
Photo by A. Trzcinski. Courtesy Monika Garbowska.

Singer at YIVO, 1983.



Photo by G. Vanclair. Courtesy YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and Monika Garbowska.

Self-caricatures of Singer, undated.



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

Singer in New York, undated.



Photo by Seymour Linden. Courtesy Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

I. B. Singer in Florida, undated.



Courtesy YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and Monika Garbowska.