

SINGER'S POLISH PERIOD: 1924 TO 1935

Moshe Yungman

Isaac Bashevis Singer's literary activity in the period before he left Poland for America in 1935 has not received much attention; yet it is a period of great importance as it provides insight into his background and into the factors that shaped his later development as a writer. Fortunately, Singer makes the work of critic and reader easier by providing plenty of information on this period of his life. *In My Father's Court* covers his childhood and adolescence, and so do pieces in the *Forward*, written under the name of Warshavsky.

From these memoirs we learn that Isaac was born in Leoncin in 1904, the third child among four. His father from Tomashov, a rabbi descended from Hasidic rabbis, was a simple, honest man, other-worldly, immersed day and night in Torah and Kabbalah. His mother Bas-sheva, of a *Mitnaged* family, whose father was a rabbi in Bilgoray, was herself an intelligent woman, a realist, the complete opposite of her husband, yet also committed to preserving meticulously the tradition and the familial framework. Brother Israel Joshua, who was ten years older than Isaac—and who, while Isaac was still a child, was already writing and painting—was considered by his parents to be *apikoyres*, a nonbeliever and therefore fallen on evil ways. Sister Hinda, always at odds with her mother, suffered from an inferiority complex, was always sickly, and was married early to a young man from Brussels.

Isaac grew up in an atmosphere of unmitigated piety, of simplistic concepts of good and evil, of fears arising from superstitions, of the evil urge lurking everywhere. In order to discourage Isaac from following in his "licentious" brother's footsteps, the parents fed him stories of *Zaddikim* and wondrous deeds. On the other hand, they also told him of demons and spirits and creatures from the Midrashic worlds.

When Isaac was three the family moved to Warsaw. Rabbi Singer, who used to be the right-hand man for the rabbi of Radzymin, quickly became the local rabbinic judge of Krokmalna, in the poorer district of Warsaw. His house became a sort of "wailing wall" for poor, defeated Jews and unhappy women who had been deserted or were about to be

Translated from the Hebrew by Nili Wachtel.

divorced. Isaac witnessed the familial tragedies that came before his father to adjudicate, disputes in matters of people or property that Isaac could not yet understand. But he could sense the pent-up emotions and urges concealed behind them. From his mother he heard strange stories, spiced with superstitions, that women pass among themselves in the rabbi's waiting room. Isaac was also his father's assistant; he was sent to bring in all parties to the *Din Torah*. Later he collected from neighborhood Jews the meager fees that ensured his family's existence. He learned how the collectors who preceded him cheated his father and pocketed the money they collected.

World War I completely shook up the family, which had been living from hand to mouth. No one collected contributions. Israel Joshua was drafted and nothing was heard from him. The mother traveled with her two younger sons to Bilgoray, and there learned that her father, the rabbi of Bilgoray, had died. In Bilgoray Isaac befriended local youths and became acquainted with uncles and aunts, some of whom were rather strange. He studied and read voraciously. During additional visits to Bilgoray—we read in his memoirs—he learned Hebrew and even composed a poem in that language; though he himself ascribed no value to this poem, he had apparently written a number of other poems, which he brought out when he wished to enter the *Tahnkemoni* school. During his visits to Bilgoray he also established with his friends a branch of *HaChalutz* and published a periodical (one issue only) called *Salemandra*. In that periodical he published a satire of his own, written in the first person. He also did some teaching: in Bilgoray, where he organized a group for Hebrew, and in the village of Jusefov, where he taught the local miller's children. In Jusefov he heard from the peasants legends of demons and spirits from Polish folklore; from Jews he heard stories of the dead who pray at night in the cold synagogue and of demons disguised as calves or sacks of sugar. His visits to Bilgoray gradually severed him from the puritanical atmosphere of his parents' home. Also contributing to this break was his visit to his brother's studio, where for the first time Isaac met the bohemians of that era, girls who smoked, men who were liberated in opinions and deeds.

The end of World War I and the years immediately following find the young Isaac in both spiritual and physical straits. These were the first years of Polish independence, marked by severe inflation and an extreme nationalist mood. Jews were severely mistreated and their economic condition—already shaky—was further undermined. The flow of Jews from the provinces to the capital during the war increased the Jewish population, intensifying the poverty, the despair, the feeling of “no exit.” His parents and youngest brother moved to a small

town near Bilgoray. Isaac was constantly pulled to Warsaw, to its rich libraries and to the Yiddish literary life that was beginning to awaken in it, in which his brother Israel Joshua, who had returned from Russia, occupied an important position. Isaac's economic situation was bad, but he refused to ask for his brother's help.

In his memoirs Isaac tells a great deal about his thoughts at the time, his struggles and his fantasies. To this period probably belong his first attempts to write in Esperanto and in Polish—attempts that were abandoned—and also the writing exercises with which he filled old notebooks. These writing exercises included, among other things, principles of behavior, and even new “sayings,” of excellent originality, accompanied by sketches of fantastic monsters. At the same time, probably, occurred Isaac's meetings—at his brother's house—with young writers and poets whose names were already known: Perets Markish, Alter Katsizne, Israel Shtern, and others.

Two events from the time had a profound effect on Singer's life and creativity: the establishment of the weekly *Literarishe bleter* and his acquaintance with the poet Aaron Zeitlin. What is of interest is the fact that to the four founding editors of the periodical—Markish, Melekh Ravitch, Nakhmen Mayzl, and I. J. Singer—Isaac was added as proofreader. His work as proofreader did not much improve his economic situation (the economic situation of the periodical itself was pretty sad), but the fact that he was associated with *Literarishe bleter* brought him into contact with writers, gave him access to the Writers Association—at first only as I. J. Singer's younger brother—and soon opened up to him, very slightly and very slowly, the pages of the periodical itself. The editors (perhaps especially the editor-in-charge, Nakhmen Mayzl), were in no rush to publish the stories he had written, but they encouraged him to interview Jewish VIPs who came to Warsaw and to review books sent to the office.

His first piece appeared under the pseudonym Isaac Tse (according to his memoirs in the *Forward*) in *Literarishe bleter* in 1924 (no. 34), devoted to the literary monthly *HaShiloakh*. In this little piece the analytical ability of the author is already evident, as is his ability to formulate his critique in direct, concise phrases. This is the first publication by Singer and also his first appearance as a sharp critic—an occupation he would continue and refine in the future.

The second event that took place at that time, his acquaintance with Aaron Zeitlin, quickly turned into a deep friendship and continued until Zeitlin's death. According to Singer's memoirs, this acquaintance occurred accidentally in the Writers Association building on 13 Tlomatske Street. Singer probably already knew of Zeitlin, who was famous in Yiddish circles as an original poet and an intellectual

leaning toward mysticism. It is also probable that he was familiar with Zeitlin's apocalyptic poem "Metatron," with its Kabbalistic symbolism, a poem that was supposed to serve as a sort of antithesis to Uri Tsvi Greenberg's famous poem "Mefisto," also published in 1922. Years later Singer characterized Zeitlin's contribution as the infusion of mysticism into Yiddish literature during those troubled, post-World War I years.

Yiddish literature in Poland at that time was confronted by a group of young writers: Perets Markish, Moshe Broderzon, Melekh Ravitch, Uri Tsvi Greenberg, Alter Katsizne, and others. In the name of various *isms*, these writers waved slogans calling for the destruction of the old world and the old culture, preaching instead an intellectual radicalism; some put the emphasis on class consciousness as the key to everything. In their writing there was something alienated, something borrowed, some "imported product." Against all these, Zeitlin took a stand.

From the first, the two writers found a common language. This friendship brought Isaac to the open house of Aaron's father, the noted Kabbalist and thinker Hillel Zeitlin. It also increased Singer's interest in other metaphysical areas, such as spiritualism and occultism, and helped—indirectly—to develop that other dimension in his writing, the demonic. There is no doubt that this friendship enriched both Singer and Zeitlin intellectually; indeed, a number of years later they collaborated on several works.

And yet, Singer continued at this time (1924) to be depressed. The reasons are both material and spiritual. Materially his situation did not improve much, despite his work as a proofreader. His affair with his relative Gina and the fact that he had a place to sleep (her place) offered no comfort. On the contrary, he was afraid that his relationship with Gina would be discovered—and his conscience bothered him as well. Also, there was the nightmare of being drafted into the Polish army: soon he would be called up, and he didn't want to serve. The thought of undressing in front of the medical committee terrified him. His appearance, as he saw (and described) it, filled him with horror: thinning red hair, intensely blue eyes, a pallor as if he had just left his sickbed; he is hunched up, his nose chronically running, his clothes sloppy, his shoelaces always untied. Also, he is a shy man who tries to cover up his shyness with an excess of braggadocio and daring toward women who, despite his repelling appearance (according to Singer), are attracted to him like butterflies to light. In the company of women he was at first restrained and introverted, but later scintillating and funny. He also considered going to Palestine, but he knew his weaknesses: in Palestine hard physical labor was necessary, and he was a weakling. And above all, he wanted to write. To these struggles were

added the stubborn refusal of *Literarische bleter* to print his stories. Left no choice, under an assumed name he entered a story contest sponsored by *Literarische bleter*. But the paper was in no rush to announce the winners. For all those reasons Singer—depressed, frustrated, and helpless—lost faith in himself. He confesses in his memoirs to even contemplating suicide.

The year 1925 was better. Singer began to be published, not only as critic and interviewer for *Literarische bleter*, not only as "I.J.S.'s younger brother," but as a writer in his own right. The first story of his to be published (under an assumed name) was "Oyf der elter" (Old Age) in *Literarische bleter* (issue no. 60), the story he had entered in the contest.

Out of the same social background—Krokhmalna Street and environs—come two stories in Hebrew which Bashevis published in 1925 in the paper *HaYom* (Today). Bashevis notes in his memoirs that the regular proofreader of the paper, Michael Singer (a relative of his brother's wife), did not work on Shabbat, and so Bashevis was invited to serve as a kind of "Sabbath-Goy" in his place. The paper's editors, Yosef Haftman, Tahon, and Y. Cohen, invited him also to write Hebrew stories for the paper. (This was after Bashevis had published his second story in *Literarische bleter*.) And so, in the issues of Yom Kippur Eve and Sukkot Eve we find two tales signed "Bashevis": "Candles" and "In the Courtyard of Strangers." These are apparently the only two stories Bashevis wrote in Hebrew. In his memoirs Singer says *HaYom*'s editors asked him to continue his Hebrew writing, but his feeling for Yiddish was much stronger. Several factors were probably responsible for this: his connections to *Literarische bleter*, his brother's influence, and his friendship with Zeitlin. After being very active in *HaYom* and publishing poems and other pieces in it, Zeitlin gradually decreased his participation and finally stopped altogether. It is also possible that Bashevis did not continue with his Hebrew writing because, after his two stories appeared in *Literarische bleter*, his luck began to change. His struggles and difficulties notwithstanding, his great dream began to be realized: to be a Yiddish writer.

Bashevis' literary and journalistic output in the years 1925 to 1935 includes essays, criticism, and translations, as well as many stories—the crowning glory of which is the historical tale *Satan in Goray*. To this output can be added work done in collaboration with Zeitlin in parapsychology (which appeared later also in Hebrew) called "The Other Reality," and also the planning and beginning of *The Family Moskat*. Belonging to this period too are his impressions of a trip in Zakopane, whose rugged wilderness was lavishly described in *The Slave*.

Vasily overstates his talents as a critic

Bashevis continued to publish critical essays at irregular intervals from 1926 to 1928 in *Literarishe bleter*, under the signature "I. B." These are short pieces on current Yiddish books. In them, as in the piece on *HaShiloakh* in 1924, the analytical talents of the author and his ability to characterize an entire book in one or two sentences are visible. This is how Bashevis kills off a weak book: "It is decidedly unnecessary to argue with the empty pages of this book." And this is how he exposes a second-rate poet:

The author wanted to describe a World War . . . this is why the pages are filled with guns, bayonets, blood, smoke. . . like all those who cannot write, he paid attention first of all to the rhythm: shooting, falling, shooting, falling . . . yes, they shoot and they fall, but the reader remains indifferent. The book is an example of how not to write.

In a piece on the book *Nokh der forshetlung* (After the Performance) by Jacob Botoshansky:

The author doesn't seem to care whether he is understood or not. His irritating stories are unintelligible, his interjections drip hysteria. . . He could have created something really interesting out of the plethora of characters and situations.

It is interesting to see Bashevis' opinion of a writer who was famous at the time, S. Miller, and of his Book *Bleter faln* (Leaves Fall):

S. Miller is a little too sophisticated, speaks too much, constantly speaking of heroes' thoughts. He is much more convincing with the atmosphere he evokes than with his descriptions which are confused, full of declarations and useless comments. An exception to this is his story "The Meal."

He hits the target with his concise remarks on I. Kipnis's new work, *Months & Days*: "Realism and simplicity—his talent is growing and becoming stronger." And on L. Olitsky's *In shayn fun Flamen* (In the Glow of Flames): "Some of his descriptions Ulitsky overdoes to such an extent that he forgets his intention, thereby weakening his entire structure, and it gets to the point . . . where his stories resemble simple chronicles." He does praise Ulitsky's juicy Volhynic language. He is also right on target with an essay on Israel Rabon's book of poems, *Hintern ployt fun der velt* (Behind the Fence of the World):

Who would have thought that through these poems a writer speaks to us from whom Yiddish poetry can expect great things. . . . In many of his poems Rabon is indeed too simplistic. . . . Both the tone and the meter are too close to Halpern's magnificent, narrative, ballads. . . . Rabon must avoid this.

Despite their brevity, these pieces prove that Bashevis had already arrived at some concrete aesthetic standards by which he measured others and also tried to function himself. From his memoirs we know that in *Salemandra*, the single issue that he put out together with his friends in Bilgoray, Bashevis had composed a devastating attack on the *Khalyastre* poets. Possibly his friendship with Zeitlin also helped arouse in him resistance to the "Prolet-Cult" system and to assert the examination of aesthetic aspects as the central function of criticism. A clear definition of Bashevis' ideas on creativity and on criticism came later on, when he was in America:

Every creator is a pioneer in his own right. Everyone has to start from the beginning. In art there is no such thing as "evolution," no such thing as general progress. There are no guarantees that after the giants of art there will not come the dwarfs who will sit on their shoulders and surpass them—as it were—in greatness. The dwarf-artist will of necessity remain small. There is no hope for him to be thought great. . . . Criticism has the following roles: a) to be able to distinguish between pseudo-art and art; b) to desanctify, whenever necessary, sacred myths and to attack literary traditions; c) to pave the way for a writer who has talent.

652 : 1940 68/13
There is no doubt that Bashevis arrived at this crystallization of his ideas after prolonged reading of works in Yiddish and in other languages and after composing other critical essays (especially in *Globus* and *Di Tzukunft*), but the seed to this approach is already found in the essays of 1924 to 1928.

Aiding the development of Bashevis' aesthetic sensitivity were, no doubt, the translations he worked on in those years: translations of Gabriel D'Annunzio, Knut Hamsun, Karin Michaelis, Stefan Zweig, and Thomas Mann. All were done from the German. These translations, as well as the stories he himself wrote during those years, revealed to Bashevis the difficulties facing an author, a realist, when he needs to impart his heroes' thoughts. The result of Bashevis' researches into this dilemma is his essay "Verter oder bilder" (Words or Pictures) in 1927. After establishing that the lyric poet *reacts* to events

while the realist *presents* the events and lets the reader react, Bashevis develops his own thesis: Does the realistic story *have* to present only the visible picture? And more especially: Is it possible, in pictures only, to present a man as he is, in all his complexity?

The answer is not simple. It is true that it is impossible to depict a man fully with pictures that view him only from outside. But does the realistic author really have no control over the inner experience? Is the predilection to "outwardness" an essential characteristic of realism, or is it perhaps only a lower stage that needs to be gone through in order to reach a higher stage? It is certainly not by accident that the epic is so close to the chronicle. Both epic and chronicle draw from the same well: life. But if for the chronicle reality is an *object*, for the epic it serves as a kind of *model*, a prototype. For that reason, the realistic writer is, first of all, a translator of the prototype. Nature is the mother of all art. Art is nothing but empty forms that need to be filled by life experiences. But does the realistic writer really need to confine himself only to events he witnessed and that actually took place? Or is it only an accident that realistic stories stubbornly skirt what is within us and cannot be grasped by our senses? No! It is no accident! A writer requires a well-endowed fountain from which he can draw at will. Such a bottomless fountain is nature, none other. Few writers succeed in penetrating the souls of their heroes. The rest, when they wish to transmit what their hero thought or felt, make use of their own thoughts and feelings: and this is a poor source since the realistic writer—by his very nature—needs to draw up a great many impressions. This, therefore, is the limitation: Not everything can be described in pictures, and as a result of that, a large part of our lives remains in shadow. This limitation causes many writers to rebel against realism, and they seize on other *isms*, for example, Expressionism, which tries to "storm the barricades" and reach the essence. There are those who find compromises, others who make peace with the barrier and try to extract the maximum within the given framework. The author finishes his essay with this statement: "Not everything can be transmitted through description, but whatever is transmitted by a realistic story must be transmitted through description."

At that time Bashevis was not alone in struggling with this problem. One of the subjects of the writer-lecturers who toured the provinces on behalf of the Referent Bureau (Lecture Bureau) was: "Expressionism un ale ibrike izmen in der kunst" (Expressionism and All Other *Isms* in Art). For Bashevis this was not merely an academic problem; it arose as a result of his own struggles with his writing and of his deep involvement with the books he was reading or translating. Above all he was preoccupied with the question: What is the best

vantage point from which the omniscient writer can penetrate his heroes' innermost recesses? It seems that he was not willing to accept the iron curtains the realistic system dictates, nor was he prepared to compromise either; rather, he strove to achieve that higher stage he mentions in his essay. It also appears that the monologue-form he adopted for many of his later stories stems from this same desire: to find a way to penetrate his heroes' souls, although even this form presents problems of its own. Bashevis, beginning his way as a writer, was schooled in Knut Hamsun's and Dovid Bergelson's lyrical prose; years had to pass before he realized that this style was not for him and that what appealed to him was a story in which the realistic leads to something that transcends realism.

One should see 1932 as a year of special significance in the shaping of Bashevis as a writer. In 1932 I. J. Singer's *Yoshe Kalb* appeared, and in that same year *Globus* was founded with Zeitlin as editor and with Bashevis' active participation. *Globus* was intended to be a forum for pure art and for the airing of problems absorbing the Jewish intellectual world. Between Zeitlin and Bashevis there was a full conceptual partnership in their criticism of Yiddish literature. Above all they fought the fake leftist tendency that conquered the Jewish world and found its way into literature. In a letter directed to the eminent critic Shmuel Niger, Zeitlin declared that there are among us "few, very few, who are still capable of believing to the end in a profane or a sacred of their own making . . . truth has vanished from our house."

As an example of falsification, Zeitlin cites "Penek," the first part of *Baym dneiper*, by Dovid Bergelson: "Penek" is "only a combination of the artistic and the proletarian—not a *fusion*." Bashevis also comes out with an extensive critique of Bergelson. Bergelson, writes Bashevis, is an analyst. He tries "to unmask his heroes, to show us that which they are trying to conceal." Bergelson never tried to justify or condemn his heroes' deeds. With "Penek" Bergelson tries to move from just literature to proletarian literature and decides at the outset that Penek will be a revolutionary. But here he comes upon a serious problem: Penek's character is not fully crystallized. He still does not possess those special "individual lines" that communicate the character of a child. Two methods exist for describing children: the evolutionary method of Romain Rolland (*Jean Cristophe*) and the one used by Tolstoy and Gorky: to describe the world through the eyes of the child. But in order to employ the latter method, it is necessary to know the child's "eyeglasses." Only in this way will the reader avoid feeling that behind the imaginary eyes of the child is an adult who is really doing the seeing. "As we read 'Penek' we feel first of all that young Penek is seeing things exactly as Bergelson sees them today, not even as he saw

them a few years ago." As Bashevis analyzes Bergelson's protagonist, he is full of wonder:

To take such a Penek, a child of Orthodox parents, who is surrounded for the moment by nothing but Orthodox people, and to turn him into a full-fledged Marxist, a ripe revolutionary—that's a little too naive. . . . Instead of Bergelson's adjusting himself to Penek, he makes Penek adjust himself to him.

This same important demand that Bashevis makes of Bergelson's "Penek"—"to describe the world through the eyes of a child while knowing the eyeglasses of the child"—he makes also in his critique of the book *Yidn fun a gantz yor* (Ordinary Jews) by Yehoshua Perle: "The child described is one through whose eyes Perle as he is today is gazing upon the past." It is almost an unavoidable error, says Bashevis, made by those who write about themselves. Perle attempted to solve the dilemma by ignoring himself as much as he could, but the result is that we know next to nothing about Mendel's spiritual life, or about his inner world. In any case, this writer's hidden aim is to describe life in a darker light than it really is. This approach is typical not only of Perle, but also of other modern realistic writers like Bergelson, A. M. Fuchs, Oyzer Varshavsky, and others. Wishing to be "true to life," to avoid any idealization, they exaggerate in the opposite direction.

A penetrating expression of Bashevis' battle against literature-in-service-of-a-cause, an expression that is also Bashevis' literary credo, is his essay "Tzu der frage vegn dichtung un politik" (Concerning Literature and Politics). The essay opens with Spinoza's motto: "Hatred can never be good," and the thesis discussed is the increasing polarization between world proletarianism and fascism. This polarization causes each side (meaning politicians on each side) to recruit its own soldiers, and also asks the writer unequivocally—Whose side are you on? The writer must then serve that side with the pen just as the soldier serves it with the gun. This question is directed especially to a "valuable" writer, who has not yet decided on his stance, and for that reason is viewed by the politicians as a deserter. The politician explains the writer's silence as opposition, and for that reason begins himself to "organize art. Because, after all, taste is something that can change with time. People will get used to the substitution."

The politician wants the writer to arouse hatred between the classes, because hatred is "the horse on which the politician rides." An example: immediately after the war they spoke of peace, but not long afterwards they began to speak of revenge. The politician wants from the writer not books that will bring people together, but books that will

incite one against the other. The politician hates the individual: he is ready to murder him, and in this he is the complete opposite of the artist. And these people—the politicians—are trying to make a match between themselves and the artist! But it is written: "God made this in opposition to that." Together with the bloodthirsty beast was born also the sensitive man. And behold, both are similar among themselves, the politicians in their striving to rule and to oppress, and the writers—in their own common character to open eyes to see how wretched is man. "Every one, in his very essence, is an antithesis to the progress and aim of history," the prophet-poet on the one hand, and Gengis Khan, Napoleon, and Hitler on the other. All of this applies, of course, to a writer of distinction and not to a writer who willingly follows the politician as the dog follows the hunter.

It is absurd to hear, Bashevis argues, how politicians of all sides condemn the artist for his passivity. The *chutzpah* of the beast is so great that it wants to draw everything into its bloody game. But the genuine artist will never serve the killer. The artist loves man too much to comply and go where the politician sends him. The genuine poet will never deal in incitement. Not only will he not incite the rich against the poor; he will not incite the poor against the rich. It would be interesting to prove, Bashevis concludes, that the great poets, in their moments of hatred, were no better than the mediocre ones and that distinction came to them only when they treated the object of their writing with love.

In spite of the extremism in his views, it is possible to see in this essay of Bashevis' a courageous defense of a new approach that began to be noticeable in 1932 among Yiddish writers in Poland: a predilection to pure art, and an awakening from the intoxication of "Prolet-Cult" that ruled the Jewish world. This awakening has nothing to do with Bashevis' own work. In the pieces he publishes after his first two Yiddish stories, he continues to search for the individual, distinctive expression that is so important to him. With all his might he tries to preserve two essential principles: not to be drawn into the style that is fashionable among the Yiddish writers of Poland, the "Prolet-Cult," originating in the USSR; and "That the plot of the story must accomplish something, to take man out of the routine toward something more exalted and profound."

From the thematic point of view, Bashevis continues to move within the narrow circle he himself criticized in his analysis of Poland's Yiddish literature. He may live in a large city, but he doesn't know the life-style of a metropolis. It is the extension of the provinces, with its want, its poverty, its sense of no exit. It is the disintegration that was already felt in the homes of the various "grandchildren," the

rushing about as if within a trap, that he knew so well in his childhood, in the days of *In My Father's Court*. The ugliness is exchanged for grotesquerie, the pain for sarcasm. But even in this circle of hell on earth, there is always the possibility of finding a surprising exception. A story—it must never be boring; this is probably the gospel that the young writer keeps repeating to himself.

The heroes of most of the twenty stories (including the two Hebrew stories) Bashevis published between 1924 and 1935 (excluding *Satan in Goray*) can be called *losers*: they lose their property, their status, even their physical or spiritual capacities. This downfall comes as a result of war ("Yordim"), of social changes ("Eyniklekh," "Reshtlekh," "Oyfn oylem ha-tohu"), of death ("Vayber"), of physical disintegration ("In an alt hoyz"), of old age ("A dorfs-kabren"), etc. Sometimes the socioeconomic descent causes a moral descent ("In keler") or perversions and fantasies ("Tsvishn vent"). In one story ("Tsurik vegs," "The Road Back") the hero Svirsky is a real "descender."

Wandering is a common element in many of Bashevis' stories at this time ("Oyfn oylem ha-tohu," "Reshtlekh," "Shamay veyts," "Yordim," "In Letste teg," "Der yid fun bovl," "A zokn"), and it is found also in *The Family Moskat*. Probably this reflects, in a sense, the experience of the writer himself, who wandered from Warsaw to Bilgoray or Jusefov, and back. Autobiographical elements can also be found in "Reshtlekh" and "Sale."

The descending heroes do not struggle with their descent or with their disintegration. They are moved as if by blind fate, with which there is no point in struggling. We also do not find in the stories any attempt by the author to enter their innermost recesses. Instead, we find much detail and a precise description of external situations that move the plot forward. In this Bashevis confirms the theory he develops in his essay "Verter oder bilder," about the dilemma facing the realist writer when he needs to communicate thoughts or feelings:

Why tell what the hero thinks? . . . It is better if I tell what my hero does. From this you will deduce anyhow what he "wanted" to do and what he "thought" to do, because a powerful desire moves our senses, and a powerful thought leads to deeds.

This approach, apart from the support that Bashevis himself gives it in "Verter oder bilder," comes as if to admit the limitations of the omniscient writer, and to confirm the statement, made in I. J. Singer's novel, by Yoshe Kalb-Nokhumtshe: "One knows nothing about oneself." But this is not the case. We know that in his searching he is also preoccupied with the second question he articulated in that same

essay: Is the predilection to "externals" an essential characteristic of realism, or is it only a lower stage, which needs to be surpassed to reach a higher one? We shall still see what additional means Bashevis requires in order to go beyond the limitations of the omniscient realist writer.

In his article "Arum der yidisher literatur in poyln," Bashevis remarks that the publication of *Yoshe Kalb* in 1932, after a silence of several years, was a turning point in his brother's writing. It is possible to say that for Bashevis, also, 1932 was a turning point. In that year he published, among others, "A zokn" and "Der yid fun bovl." To the old man of "A zokn" a strange thing happens, something supernatural: he overcomes all misfortunes and miseries and at an ancient age marries and begets a son.

What looks in "A zokn" like an incomprehensible phenomenon, a result of blind determinism, acquires in "Der yid fun bovl" the meaning of a visible struggle between man and Satan and his minions that took him over. It is true that in 1928, in the story "Oyfn oylem ha-tohu," Bashevis shows a similar situation of a man pursued by demons. But Shimon, the rabbi's degenerating son, is insane. His entire behavior, including the thought of completing de la Reina's experience, testifies to his madness; the demonic forces operate only in the background and only by implication. In "Der yid fun bovl" the demonic forces are in the foreground. Here we find for the first time in Bashevis the force of evil in confrontation with Providence over the soul of man. Since this story appeared in 1932, the same year as *Yoshe Kalb*, it is difficult not to suggest that there is here an influence—even if indirect—of I. J. Singer on his younger brother.

We find signs of influence even earlier. In "Shamay vayts" there is someone called Pan Zombak, who is a sort of "factotum" in the printing shop, a drunk who is reminiscent of Stanislaw Zomba of "Alt-shtot" by I. J. Singer. The wedding in the story is also reminiscent of the banquet of "Alt-shtot." Perhaps there was also a reverse influence of Bashevis on his older brother. It is true that they drew inspiration and influences from identical sources, but I. J. Singer's creative world was different. We shall not exaggerate, therefore, if we argue that during I. J.'s silent years, the forgotten world opened for him—under the influence of "Oyfn oylem ha-tohu"—of Kabbalists and Hassidic rabbis, of superstitions, dybbuks, and transmigrations, a world that put him on the road to *Yoshe Kalb*. In "Oyfn oylem ha-tohu" we find the seed of the impressive market scene of *Yoshe Kalb*. On the other hand, the fact that his famous brother depicted the old Jewish world in his book gave Bashevis tremendous impetus to carry on with the materials he had been accumulating for a long time—studies and legends of the Jewish

and Polish world—an occupation that would give him, at the same time, the answer to his search for self-expression: the demonic world. And if “Oyfn oytem ha-tohu” served as stimulus for *Yoshe Kalb*, then *Yoshe Kalb* contributed in no small measure to the development of *Satan in Goray*. From Bashevis’ memoirs we learn that he began to write *Satan in Goray* shortly after *Yoshe Kalb* was favorably received by readers; that is, at the end of 1932 or the beginning of 1933. *Satan in Goray* appeared in 1935. It is no accident that Zeitlin was a sponsor of Bashevis’ first book. The friendship between the two writers intensified because of shared viewpoints: on the one hand, the belief in supernatural forces, and on the other, the commitment to a pure art that draws its subjects from our people’s treasures, an approach which had also been the cornerstone of the periodical *Globus*. Doubtlessly the idea of redemption, which had been dear to Zeitlin as far back as the days of “Metatron,” brought them closer as well.

With the introduction of the demonic world into his stories, Bashevis found the long-sought key with which to surmount the limitations imposed by realism and despite them to penetrate his heroes’ souls. Feelings and thoughts are reflected in the mystical world, the supernatural world. This does not mean giving up realism. The mode of writing remains realistic, but a new dimension is added to it, one that deepens the plot—the mystic dimension. Bashevis defined his new way thus:

To build the spirits’ story on the foundation of folk life and of rooted Judaism. . . . The more the realism compressed behind the mystic plot, the more the story will be convincing. Miracles and wonder deeds don’t happen in a vacuum. They happen to people of flesh and blood, within the framework of everyday life.

1965

And again we are reminded of Zeitlin’s “Metatron.”

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER AND THE LEGEND OF THE GOLEM OF PRAGUE

Arnold L. Goldsmith

It comes as no surprise that America’s foremost Yiddish author, with his extensive knowledge of the folklore and legends of seventeenth-century Poland and his love of and belief in the supernatural, should turn to the remarkable golem of Prague as the subject of a short novel for adolescents. Isaac Bashevis Singer published *The Golem* in the *Jewish Daily Forward* in 1969, revised and translated it into English in the fall of 1981, and published it in hardback in 1982.¹ For those familiar with the literary treatment of this legend in the twentieth century by Rabbi Judah Rosenberg, Chayim Bloch, H. Leivick, Gustav Meyrink, Abraham Rothberg, and others,² it is interesting to explore Singer’s debt to and departures from the original legend, especially in light of his statement in 1981 that one of his criteria for writing is that he be convinced that he is “the only one who can write the [i. e., any] particular story . . . that I am saying something in my own way.”³ Though Singer’s additions to the legend are not always for the better, and though *The Golem* is not in the class of *A Day of Pleasure*, the collection of nineteen autobiographical stories about a boy’s growing up in Warsaw that won Singer the National Book Award for children’s literature in 1970, it still merits close examination.

Since the late 1960s, Singer has had much to say about writing for children.⁴ In 1968, in his introductory note to *When Shlemiel Went to Warsaw*, Singer claims that as far as he is concerned “there is no basic difference between [his] tales for adults and for young people. The same spirit, the same interest in the supernatural is in all of them.”⁵ To Singer, in the modern period when “the telling of stories is becoming a forgotten art, children are the best readers.” One year later, writing on children’s books for the *New York Times Book Review*, he explains that young readers are not interested in what the literary critics have to say. They can “enjoy a sunset without footnotes.”⁶ Unfortunately, modern literature has “torn itself from folklore, because folklore is so often superstitious and conservative, but our children are not afraid to look back. Their literature is still preoccupied with kings, princesses, devils, demons, imps, were-wolves and other old-fashioned creatures.” In 1975, in a *New York Times* review of *Russian Fairy Tales*, Singer

811-810	1926	135	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"אין קעלער"	30
828-827	1926	136	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"אין קעלער"	31
847-845	1926	137	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"אין קעלער"	32
866-865	1926	138	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"אין קעלער"	33
	1926/7	5-4	ווארשעווער שריפטן	"א דארפס-קברן", "אייניקלעך"	34
64-53	1928	1	די יידישע וועלט (ווארשה)	"אויפן עולם-התוהו"	35
929-927	1928	47	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוריקוועגס"	36
948-946	1928	48	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוריקוועגס"	37
968-966	1928	49	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוריקוועגס"	38
996-987	1928	50	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוריקוועגס"	39
527-523	1929	27	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"אין אן אלט הויז"	40
138-136	1929	7	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"רעשטלעך"	41
157-155	1929	8	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"רעשטלעך"	42
103-80	1929	1	א מאל אין א יובל (ווארשה)	"שמאי וזניץ"	43
337-336	1930	41	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צווישן ווענט"	44
787-784	1930	42	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צווישן ווענט"	45
508-507	1930	27	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוויי"	46
527-526	1930	28	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוויי"	47
700-697	1931	36	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"יורדים"	48
720-719	1931	37	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"יורדים"	49
151-139	1931	2	א מאל אין א יובל	"אין לעצטע טעג"	50
26-17	1932	2	גלאבוס	"דער ייד פון בבל"	51
8-7	1932	(400) 1	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"סאלע (א בילד)"	52
62-51	1932	4	גלאבוס	"א זקן"	53
	1935		הוצאת אגודת הסופרים, ווארשה	"דער שטן אין גארי"	54

רשימות נוספות שהתפרסמו בליטערארישע בלעטער בשנים 1925-1926⁵

55. "א שמועס מיט משה נאדיר", גיל' 114 (עמ' 446).
56. "א שמועס מיט פרץ מארקיש פאר זיין אפפארן", גיל' 117 (עמ' 494).
57. "א שעה מיט מנחמן", גיל' 118 (510-512).
58. "ביים מאלער יאנקל אדלער", גיל' 119 (528-529).
59. "א שמועס מיט ד"ר איסר גינזבורג", גיל' 120 (עמ' 547).
60. "יידישע אקטיארן וועגן זיך (שמואל לאנדאו)", גיל' 114.
61. "ביי יצחק ליכטנשטיין (פאר זיין אפפארן פון פוילן)", גיל' 129 (702-703).
62. "ביי קאדען באנדראווסקי", גיל' 130 (711-713).
63. "ביי הענרי בערלעווי", גיל' 131 (731-732).

נספח ב: שני סיפורים בעברית של יצחק כשביסזינגר

נרות

1
בערב יום הכיפורים עם חשכה קדרו פני החצר שברחוב קרוכמלנה כשולי הקדרה. עם שקיעת החמה אבדו החומות העקומות והחשופות מטיח את שארית יפין וניכר היה ענים ומרודם של דריהן מבעד השמשות הכהות. שמואל תיש, נושא-סבל, בעל פנים אדומים, כאילו נצרר דמם בתוכם, עמד על יד חלונו שבדירת המרתף שלו ועיניו נשואות למרום, שומר ומחכה מתי ידליקו שכניו שבדיוטות את נרותיהם.

יום רע היה ערב יום הכיפורים זה לשמואל, פרוטה לא השתכר וההוצאה היתה מרובה. הוא עמד על עמדו כועס ועצב, כובעו המושמן והעגול על ראשו, החבל על מתניו ועיניו סגורות לחצין מתוך יאוש. עוד מעט והוא יצא החוצה לשותות כוס יי"ש, ככה מרה לו נפשו.

⁵ רשימה זו הגיעה למערכת לאחר סידור המאמר בדפוס. כל הרשימות הן כחתימת י.ב., פרט לרשימה מס' 60, החתומה י.ב.ט.

טליון בפואמה

שנה

1924²

1926

1926

1926

1926

1926

1927

1927

1928

1928

1928

1928

בלעטער, 34

"גלאבוס, 3

"גלאבוס, 5

צמוד

235-233

263-262

301-300

גם מעברית.

המגבלות שמכתיב הריאליזם ולחדור בכל זאת לנפש גיבוריו. הרגשות והמחשבות משתקפים בעולם המיסטי, העל-טבעי. אין פירוש הדבר ויתור על הריאליזם. דרך הכתיבה נשארת ריאליסטית, אך נוסף לה ממד חדש, המעמיק יותר את העלילה – הממד המיסטי. בשבים הגדיר את דרכו החדשה כך:

לבנות את סיפור הרוחות על בסיס של חיי העם ושל יהדות שורשית [...] ככל שהריאליזם יהיה דחוס יותר מאחורי העלילה המיסטית, כן יגדל כוח השכנוע של הסיפור. ניסים ומעשי פלא אינם מתרחשים בחלל ריק. הם קורים עם אנשים בשר-ודם, במסגרת של אירועים יומיומיים. (17.7.65, [ד1])

נספח א: פירסומים של יצחק בשביס-זינגר בשנים 1924–1935¹

רשימות

נושא הרשימה

1. על השלח
2. על אונטער היימישע הימלען, מחזה מאת א. זאק
3. על ביים טייד, מאת מ. גראנאטשטיין
4. על דורך פייער-ווענט, מאת אהרן רפפורט
5. על נאך דער פאָרשטעלונג, מאת י. בוטושנסקי
6. על "אין זומפ", מחזה מאת יצחק אָווערבוך
7. על בלעטער פאָלן, מאת ש. מילער
8. על חדשים און טעג, מאת י. קיפניס
9. על אין שיינ פון פלאַמען מאת ל. אוליזקי
10. על הינטערן פלוט פון דער וועלט, מאת ישראל ראבאן
11. על צווישן זון און רעגן, מאת משה קארמאן
12. "ביי יעקב מילך (א שמועס)"

תרגומים³

13. אין אָפּגרונט פון תאוה, מאת גבריאל ד'אנונציו. וארשה, 1929
14. די וואָגלעך, מאת קנוט האמסון. וילנה, 1928.
15. פאָן, מאת קנוט האמסון. וילנה, 1928.
16. וויקטאָריאַ, מאת קנוט האמסון. וילנה, 1929.
17. מעטע טרעפ (די מאָדערנע פרוי), מאת קארין מיכאליס. וארשה, 1929.
18. ראָמען ראָלאַן, מאת סטפאן צווייג. וארשה, 1929.
19. דער צויבערבאָרג, מאת תומאס מאן. וילנה, 1930.
20. אַראַבער: פאָלקסטימלעכע געשיכטן, מאת משה סמילנסקי. וארשה, 1932.

סיפורים ביידיש

שם היצירה

- | שם היצירה | כתב-העת/הוצאה | גיליון | שנה | עמוד |
|------------------|-------------------|--------|-------------------|---------|
| "אויף דער עלטער" | ליטערארישע בלעטער | 60 | 1925 ⁴ | 235–233 |
| "ווייבער" | ליטערארישע בלעטער | 80 | 1925 | 263–262 |
| "שוועסטער" | ליטערארישע בלעטער | 103 | 1926 | 301–300 |
| "שוועסטער" | ליטערארישע בלעטער | 105 | 1926 | |

26. "אויף דער עלטער"
27. "ווייבער"
28. "שוועסטער"
29. "שוועסטער"

ושוב אנו נזכרים בשורות של אהרן צייטלין בפואמה "מטטרוו" שציטטנו לעיל:

ווי שטן? ווער שטן? ס'איז דאָ נאָר מטטרוו!

[...]

ס'איז גאָר געוועזן זיין אייגן בלינד נפש וואָס איז פונעם נאָכט-בעט אַרויס, אַ צעהיצטס, אין אַנגעגליט-שווערע הרהורי-עבירה באַגערק נאָך פרויען און ציטערט אין נאָכט-העמד! ווייס איך דאָרט! שטן!

שנה	גיליון	כתב-העת
1924 ²	34	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1926	122	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1926	124	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1926	124	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1926	127	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1926	124	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1927	5	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1927	עמ' 260	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1928	21	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1928	22	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1928	23	ליטערארישע בלעטער
1928	28	ליטערארישע בלעטער

מסות

21. "ווערטער אָדער בילדער". ליטערארישע בלעטער, 34, 1927.
22. "צו דער פראַגע וועגן דיכטונג און פאָליטיק". גלאבוס, 3, 1932.
23. "וועגן דוד בערגעלסאָנס ביים דניעפר (פענעק)". גלאבוס, 5, אָסאָס, 1932.

סיפורים בעברית

24. "נרות". היום, 224 (27.9.1925).
25. "בחצר של נכרים". היום, 227 (2.10.1925).

¹ כל הפירסומים שלגביהם לא צוין בפירוש אחרת חתומים בשם (יצחק) בשבים (וביידיש: באַשעוויס, כמוכּוּן). הרשימות (ממס') 2 ואילך) חתומות בראשי-התיבות י.ב.

² בחתימת יצחק צבי.
³ כל התרגומים נעשו מגרמנית פרט לאחרון, שתורגם מעברית.
⁴ בחתימת צע.

א גוואלמיגע מענסאציע האט ארויס, קיין נעלד ווערען זיי קאמפראמיטירט

811-810	1926	135	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"אין קעלער"	30.
828-827	1926	136	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"אין קעלער"	31.
847-845	1926	137	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"אין קעלער"	32.
866-865	1926	138	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"אין קעלער"	33.
	1926/7	5-4	ווארשענער שריפטן	"א דאָרפֿס־קברן", "אייניקלעך"	34.
64-53	1928	1	די יידישע וועלט (וארשה)	"אויפן עולם-התווה"	35.
929-927	1928	47	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוריקוועגס"	36.
948-946	1928	48	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוריקוועגס"	37.
968-966	1928	49	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוריקוועגס"	38.
996-987	1928	50	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוריקוועגס"	39.
527-523	1929	27	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"אין אן אלט הויז"	40.
138-136	1929	7	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"רעשטלעך"	41.
157-155	1929	8	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"רעשטלעך"	42.
103-80	1929	1	א מאָל אין אַ יובל (וארשה)	"שמאי ווייץ"	43.
337-336	1930	41	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צווישן ווענט"	44.
787-784	1930	42	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צווישן ווענט"	45.
508-507	1930	27	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוויי"	46.
527-526	1930	28	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"צוויי"	47.
700-697	1931	36	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"יורדים"	48.
920-719	1931	37	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"יורדים"	49.
151-139	1931	2	א מאָל אין אַ יובל	"אין לעצטע טעג"	50.
26-17	1932	2	גלאָבוס	"דער ייד פון בבל"	51.
8-7	1932	(400) 1	ליטערארישע בלעטער	"סאלע (א בילד)"	52.
62-51	1932	4	גלאָבוס	"א זקן"	53.
	1935		הוצאת אגודת הסופרים, וארשה	"דער שטן אין גאָר"	54.

רשימות נוספות שהתפרסמו בליטערארישע בלעטער בשנים 1925-1926⁵

55. "א שמועס מיט משה נאדיר", גיל' 114 (עמ' 446).
56. "א שמועס מיט פרץ מאַרקיש פאַר זיין אָפּפאַרן", גיל' 117 (עמ' 494).
57. "א שעה מיט מנחמן", גיל' 118 (510-512).
58. "ביים מאָלער יאַנקל אַדלער", גיל' 119 (528-529).
59. "א שמועס מיט ד"ר איסר גינזבורג", גיל' 120 (עמ' 547).
60. "יידישע אַקטיאָרן וועגן זיך (שמואל לאַנדאָו)", גיל' 114.
61. "ביי יצחק ליכטנשטיין (פאַר זיין אָפּפאַרן פון פוילן)", גיל' 129 (702-703).
62. "ביי קאָדען באַנדראָווסקי", גיל' 130 (711-713).
63. "ביי הענרי בערלעווי", גיל' 131 (731-732).

נספח ב: שני סיפורים בעברית של יצחק בשביס-זינגר

נרות

1

בערב יום הכיפורים עם חשכה קדרו פני החצר שברחוב קרוכמלנה כשולי הקדרה. עם שקיעת החמה אבדו החומות העקומות והחשופות מטיח את שארית יפין וניכר היה ענים ומרודם של דריהן מבעד השמשות הכהות. שמואל תיש, נושא-סבל, בעל פנים אדומים, כאילו נצרר דמם בתוכם, עמד על יד חלונן שבדירת המרתף שלו ועיניו נשואות למרום, שומר ומחכה מתי ידליקו שכניו שבדיוטות את נרותיהם.

יום רע היה ערב יום הכיפורים זה לשמואל, פרוטה לא השתכר וההוצאה היתה מרובה. הוא עמד על עמדו כועס ועצב, כובעו המשומן והעגול על ראשו, החבל על מתניו ועיניו סגורות לחצין מתוך יאוש. עוד מעט והוא יצא החוצה לשתות כוס יי"ש, ככה מרה לו נפשו.

⁵ רשימה זו הגיעה למערכת לאחר סידור המאמר בדפוס. כל הרשימות הן בחתימת י.ב., פרט לרשימה מס' 60, החתומה י.ב.ט.

מנהל יו"מ
בתי 025-5
מקום כולן כ-372
הסכום 27 (1978)
133-118
seen only 118-27