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James D. Atwater is the dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri, Columbia, and a former writer and senior editor for Time.

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Lured by the Messiah

THE FAMILY MASHBER

By Der Nister.

Translated by Leonard Wolf.

688 pp. New York:

Summit Books. \$22.95.

By Ruth R. Wisse

IN 1928, shortly after his return from western Europe to the Soviet Union, and before the campaign of public denunciation forced artists into line, the Yiddish writer Pinhas Kahanovitch, who wrote under the pseudonym Der Nister, published a characteristically opaque story called "In My Estates." In it an impoverished student comes upon a story book by Der Nister ("the hidden man"), who is portrayed on the book jacket as an institutionalized madman. The story within the story is about a keeper of 10 bears who, discovering that he has nothing left to feed his animals, offers them each one of his fingers to stave off their hunger. One by one the bears take their meal, but the ninth bear, made ravenous by the smell of blood, snaps up the two remaining fingers leaving none for the tenth. To keep the last and largest beast from making a meal of him the author promises to reveal secret sources of nourishment. Spared for the moment, he begins to tell his story.

Several years later, Der Nister began writing "The Family Mashber" as just such an attempt to keep the Russian bear at bay. A large, sprawling historical novel reminiscent of Dostoyevsky in its concentration on the human soul, it was unlike anything the author had attempted before. Kahanovitch had made his debut under his concealing pseudonym in 1907 with a timeless, mysterious kind of short fiction. Combining elements of Russian symbolism and strains of Jewish mysticism, Hassidism and folklore, his writing challenged the populist spirit of most contemporary Yiddish fiction by advertising its difficulty. Der Nister's spare narrative style hinted at ultimate sources of meaning, and his abstract plots introduced alien pagan and Christian motifs. When Der Nister showed his early work to the

Ruth R. Wisse is professor of Yiddish literature at McGill University and senior editor of "The Library of Yiddish Classics."



Pinhas Kahanovitch (1884-1950), who wrote under the pseudonym Der Nister.

Yiddish literary master I. L. Peretz he was urged to use more substantive and familiar materials.

But following World War I and the Russian Revolution Der Nister's symbolist stories only grew more layered and complex. As a member of the émigré community in Germany from 1922 to 1926, he was exposed to the atmosphere of intense, almost manic experimentation in the Weimar era. The stories he wrote during this period and in the first years after his return to Russia seemed at once a new gloss on the cabalistic mysteries and an expression of anxious adjustment to the new social order. In 1929 Der Nister was accused of decadence and individualism and he was forced, if he wanted to publish at all, to become a social realist. He settled down to translate and "observe," and he wrote lackluster reportage.

With the idea for "The Family Mashber" Der Nister felt he had found a way to satisfy both his own artistic needs and the demands of Soviet cultural policy. The choice of a historical setting — the bustling Ukrainian Jewish city of Berdichev (called N in the novel) in the

1870's — would allow him to describe his native ground without fear of political deviation. He could introduce Jewish mystics and their visionary quest as a legitimate part of the historical canvas. Indeed, from 1935 onward, as installments of the novel appeared in Soviet Yiddish journals, the work was hailed as one of the finest achievements in Soviet Yiddish literature.

What we finally have, however, is a truncated work. Part one of the novel appeared in Moscow in 1939; parts one and two — the basis of the present translation — in New York in 1948; part three was confiscated and lost when Der Nister was arrested in 1948 along with all the other major Soviet Yiddish writers. He escaped their mass execution in 1952 only by dying in 1950 in a prison hospital. Yet he could not have blamed his death on a political lapse or artistic "failure." Even those of his colleagues who had gone much further than he in appeasing the bear were consumed in the purge.

"The Family Mashber" — "mashber" means crisis — betrays the urgent circumstance of its composition. Ostensibly patterned on the great social epics of 19th-century Russian literature, it traces the decline of the three Mashber brothers: the successful, respectable merchant, Moshe; his younger brother, Alter, an apparent simpleton with unpredictable flashes of high intelligence; and the oldest brother, Luzi, who carries the spiritual burden of the family. This burden derives from their grandfather, a Jew who believed in the Messianic pretender Shabtai Tsvi, and as one of his followers committed many sins in anticipation of the Messianic kingdom. Luzi, through a lifelong moral quest, takes over from his father in trying to atone for his ancestor's heretical lapse.

LUZI'S pilgrimage brings him to the Bratslaver sect of Hasidim, and it is this unlikely affiliation that constitutes the major turning point in the plot. Of all the groups that arose since the Hasidic revivalist movement took hold among East European Jews in the 18th century, the followers of Rabbi Nakhman of Bratslav in the Ukraine alone resisted rabbinic succession, and upon his death in 1811, instead of rallying around a new authority, continued to visit his grave in Uman. The resulting anarchy made their communion as suspect as its religious intent did. Rabbi Nakhman had hinted at his Messianic role in the *tikkun*, the restoration of harmony in the world order;

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and by testifying to his exclusive leadership his followers, the "dead" Hasidim, kept that dangerous promise alive. Luzi's adherence to this semi-outcast sect undermines the prestige of the family, and the group's behavior arouses among ordinary Jews a distrust that eventually erupts in violence.

If Der Nister set out confidently to write about a reactionary religious sect at the height of Stalin's campaign for proletarian art, he obviously sensed an essential connection between the Bratslavers' faith in an imminent redemption and the pure revolutionary temper. The radical asceticism of the Bratslavers offended the bourgeois spirit, as much as the revolutionary idealists challenged the bourgeois policy. Here, for example, is Moshe Mashber's reaction when his brother joins the Bratslav sect: "The heart of the matter was, and Moshe felt this keenly, that his brother had taken a stand against an essential principle that animated and was accepted by all the world: that one had a right to struggle for acquisitions, to work for wealth, and to become wealthy without feeling ashamed. Luzi, who had heretofore been indifferent to all questions of wealth, who had never thought much about whether anyone was rich or poor, seemed now on such matters to have had a change of heart. It seemed to Moshe that Luzi now looked down at wealth, that he despised it, as if it was sinful merely to look at it — how much more sinful to take pleasure from it."

The guilt and fear that Luzi engenders precipitate Moshe's moral collapse long before a blackmail scheme involving the Polish nobility, and the consequences of a disastrous harvest, force him into bankruptcy.

Alongside Luzi — who is always associated with light — is Sruli Gol, the kind of practical facilitator so often attached to a holy man. A vivid, bitter character, Sruli rejects his inherited wealth, but uses the power it gives him to punish the rich and reward the poor. Sruli orchestrates the fatal quarrel between the Mashber brothers and derives malicious pleasure from his success; but, once Moshe is ruined, Sruli also cushions his family from ultimate humiliation. His coarse effort to force an egalitarian justice on the Jewish town cannot fail to suggest the Communist movement that would soon set about equalizing society.

But what does Der Nister think of this Messianic venture? His wariness in answering that question constitutes the hidden quality of this novel, which is ambiguous in a way that his earlier veiled fiction never was. Despite

his obvious sympathies for the oppressed, the author does not link good and bad actions to their consequences, leaving a curious moral vacuum where one would expect some moral resolution. To further disclaim responsibility for his characters he develops several strategies, such as offering a number of plausible reasons for a given action, or introducing a hypothetical "someone" to witness a scene in his stead. The translator's fidelity to the original Yiddish keeps all these features before us — even though it might have been tempting to make the book smoother or give it more variety by changing some of them.

Crisis overtakes the main characters so early in the plot that we are spared the normal suspense over what will happen next. The real tension derives from the narrator. He promises in his introduction to give us the economic underpinnings of Jewish Berdichev from which all social and cultural consequences flow, but we soon see him lost in the visions and dreams of his characters and then struggling back to his duty. He assures us that "anyone with a keen eye might even then [in the 1870's] have been able to see the seeds of the future floating in the air," leaving us to wonder whether the image suggests a hidden reservation about the future or is only accidentally sloppy.

BY drawing our attention to what Soviet historiography expects of the writer, Der Nister repeatedly exposes his deviation from it, and his every hint of the radiant future reminds the reader that the entire world of the novel must be destroyed to bring it about. Writing of its destruction was Der Nister's dangerous way of rekindling the sparks of its life. The Messianic cinders at the heart of the Bratslaver faith glow through this work. It reads like the testimony of a man who knew he was playing with fire. □

Authors' Queries

For a book on Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, I would appreciate hearing from anyone who knew or worked with both, and who has anecdotes, photographs, or information on their relationship.

SHAUN CONSIDINE
215 East 76th Street
New York, N.Y. 10021

For a study of the British-American community in Shanghai in the 1920's, I would appreciate hearing from anyone who might have letters, journals or other memorabilia of the period.

NICHOLAS R. CLIFFORD
16 Coolidge Avenue
Cambridge, Mass. 02138

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