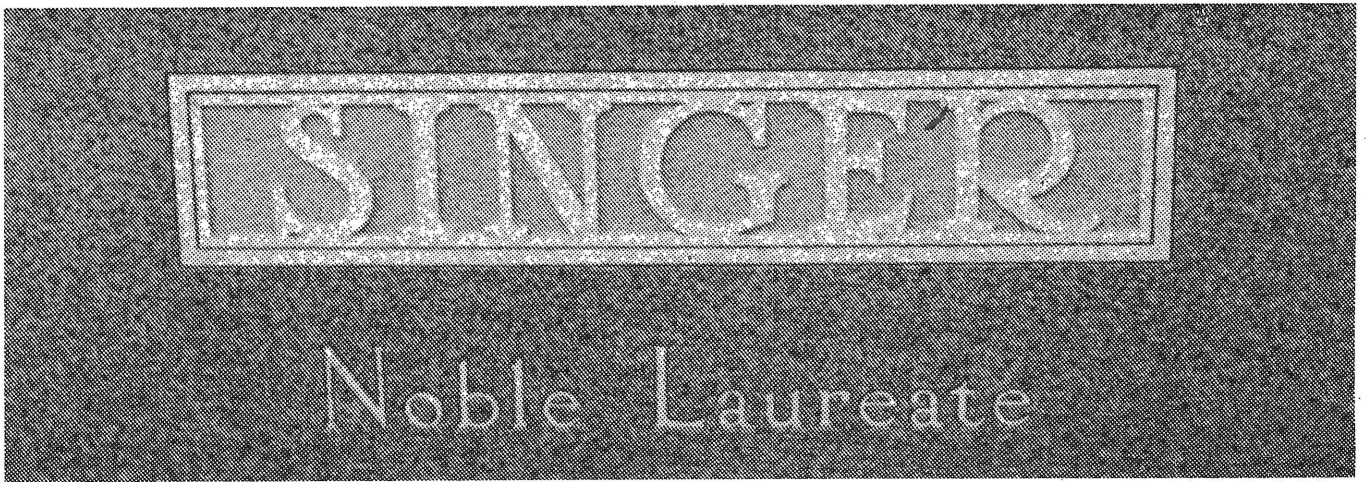




Liana Miuccio for The New York Times

Let a Wiser Writer Amend His Epitaph

Errata and Incongruities At Isaac Bashevis Singer's Grave



Photographs by Angel Franco/The New York Times

An engraver works on a correction to the gravestone of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Nobel, as in Nobel Laureate, had been spelled "Noble" on the main stone, above, and on a foot stone. Mr. Singer's wife Alma is buried beside him.



By ELISABETH BUMILLER

What writer has not suffered the indignity of a typo? But for Isaac Bashevis Singer, this particular typo was the ultimate indignity: It was on his gravestone.

To some of his friends it was a cruel insult, a mistake set in stone. Others saw it as a comic absurdity, one that would have certainly been appreciated by Singer himself. His widow, like an antic Singer character afloat in her own world, was willing to let it pass.

But yesterday, nearly six years after the death of the Yiddish writer who won the 1978 Nobel Prize for Literature, a monument engraver finally corrected Singer's honorific. Singer at last is a "Nobel" laureate, and no longer a "Noble" one, as his stone has proclaimed since 1992.

The correction brought to an end not only the unintended pun but also a saga of love and abandonment that was, in essence, Singer's longest and last short story.

"Isaac would have enjoyed the irony," said Eve Friedman, the co-author with Singer of the play "Teibele and Her Demon." "But there was something kind of sad about it. Isaac in that stone was the butt of a joke."

The typo was one of several unfortunate leitmotifs in the tale surrounding Singer's final resting place. Another was his son's anger over the site of his father's grave: why did the author of "Gimpel the Fool," who wrote such farcical stories about the ambiguities of sex and death, end up buried in suburban New Jersey, in a tree-bordered but casually kept grave site within view of an encroaching subdivision? Yet another was the family's incredulity that Singer, described by his son as a "Jewish Casanova," was laid to rest three gravestones away from the man, Walter Wassermann, from whom he stole his second wife. That woman, Alma Singer, who died in 1996, now lies next to Singer, but within feet of Mr. Wassermann — a woman buried between her first and second husbands.

If this were a Singer short story ("The Reencounter" comes to mind), Walter and Isaac would continue to glare at each other in death, through the yew bushes. "They hardly got along in life, so it's kind of ironic that they're neighbors in death," said Alma Singer's grandson, Stephen R. Dujack, who, like the rest of the family, first noticed the proximity of the graves



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Mr. Singer and his wife at their home in Manhattan in 1979.

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at what he called Singer's 1991 "funeral from hell."

(When the Singer limousine was departing the Beth-El cemetery in Paramus, N.J., it was stopped at the gate for nonpayment of the plot. Mr. Dujack offered his credit card, but Beth-El did not take Visa; Mrs. Singer had to write out a check for \$3,026 on the spot.)

The typo was discovered a year later, in the summer of 1992, at the unveiling of the gravestone in Beth-El before family and friends. Roger Straus, a founder of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Singer's publisher, was horrified, and immediately pulled Mrs. Singer aside. "I said 'This is awful, what are we going to do?'" he recalled. Mrs. Singer responded, he said, that "Noble" was "an acceptable alternative."

At that, Mr. Straus said, "I thought it was time to go for lunch."

The story really begins in a Catskills resort. The then-Alma Wassermann, a stylish, self-absorbed, 30-year-old refugee born in Germany, was married to Walter Wassermann, a wealthy businessman. They had two young children. The family had recently fled Nazi Germany and settled in Washington Heights in Upper Manhattan. In the summer of 1937, they took their first American vacation at a farm in Mountindale, N.Y. Nearby was Green Fields, a colony of Jewish writers, where Singer, 33, the son of a Warsaw rabbi and himself a recent immigrant, was staying.

Mrs. Wassermann and Singer became friends, and went for long walks with her children. The relationship continued in the city, in clandestine meetings at the New York Public Library, and grew into a romance. By 1940, Mrs. Wassermann had left her husband, who had grown withdrawn and morose, as well as Inge, 10, and Klaus, 6, to marry Singer. The newlyweds settled in Brooklyn. Inge and Klaus remained in Washington Heights, to be raised by their father and housekeepers.

"I just felt that I had to spend the rest of my life with him and therefore I had to give up my marriage and my children," Alma Singer later told Janet Hadda, the author of "Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life," a new biography. Mrs. Singer called it "a very difficult and, really, a very terrible decision to make."

Alma's daughter, Inge, never forgave her — a mother-daughter chasm that is a large part of the story behind Singer's grave. Inge grew up, married Raymond Dujack, now an economist, and settled in the small New Jersey town of Emerson.

In 1964 Inge's father, Mr. Wassermann, died. Inge, who had always loved the nearby Beth-El Cemetery, bought four plots near a tree, and buried her father in one. In 1990, Inge died of cancer at 60 and was buried in front of her father. Her mother, who by this time had been married for half a century to Singer, had not come to see her daughter during her illness. Inge was instead cared for by her friend and next-door neighbor, Leah Feingold.

The following year, Singer was dead. Mrs. Singer, searching for a suitable plot, called Mrs. Feingold, knowing she had been her daughter's friend and knowing that Mrs. Feingold lived close to Beth-El. Would Mrs. Feingold, she asked, select a nice plot for Isaac? And one where there would be room someday for her, too?

"She said she wanted it as close to Inge as possible," Mrs. Feingold

said. "She had a lot of guilt about her daughter. A lot of guilt."

So Mrs. Feingold found the grave for the Nobel laureate, which was just three stones away from Walter Wassermann, Alma's ex-husband. "Alma didn't care about that," Mrs. Feingold said.

A miserable time was had by all at the funeral. Israel Zamir, Singer's son from a common-law marriage in Poland, could not fit in the single, crowded limousine and had to beg a ride to his father's burial. In his book, "Journey to My Father," Mr. Zamir wrote that the "Godforsaken place would attract no one," but that if Singer had been buried in Israel, the grave would have been the destination of pilgrimages.

At the unveiling the following year, the family found the "Noble" typo — and two others on the smaller footstone marking Singer's grave. There, Nobel was spelled wrong, and worse, at least in Mrs. Singer's view, the "h" had been dropped from her husband's middle name.

Mrs. Singer complained to Shastone Memorial Corp. in Great Neck, N.Y., the company that had made the stones. Shastone retorted that Mrs. Singer had specified both the "Noble" and "Basevis" spelling in her original instructions, and produced documents showing her signed approval of blueprints of the stones, with all three mistakes.

"We told her the spelling of Nobel was incorrect," said Arnold Haskel,

A gravestone typo that seemed to be an indignity.

who was then the owner of Shastone. "She said, 'Do it as I gave it to you.'"

After much mutual fingerpointing, Shastone replaced the footstone with a corrected one in June 1993, at a cost of \$430 to the Singer family. (The original is now just inside the door in Shastone's Great Neck showroom, in a place of honor.) "Noble" on the big stone stayed as it was.

Over the years, the mistake gnawed at the family. In 1996, after Alma died, Susan Dujack, Alma's granddaughter and an heir to the estate, called a lawyer. Soon Shastone said they could make the change — for \$625, which Israel Zamir would pay for — but not without the approval of the two other heirs, Steven Dujack, Alma's grandson, and Klaus Wassermann, Inge's brother. Mr. Wassermann quickly said yes, but Mr. Dujack balked.

"Alma had chosen not to change it," Mr. Dujack said. "Why should I interfere with history? It had happened."

Mr. Dujack then spoke to Ms. Friedman, who reasoned with him. "Isaac," she told him, "would never want his dignity punctured to make a point about humanity."

That settled it. Yesterday in Beth-El, under an overcast sky, a monument engraver, Reed Frankel, knelt near the scruffy crabgrass that edges Singer's grave, and carefully drilled away the past. "I don't want to make a correction," said Mr. Frankel. "I want to make it look like it wasn't a correction."

Would Singer be amused or annoyed by the fuss? A clue may lie in "The Reencounter."

"Of all my disenchantments," a dead character says, "immortality is the greatest."