

Travel and Metamorphosis in I. B. Singer's Fiction

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1. EXILE AND OUR TIME

After a few years of exile, Jewish Rumanian writer Norman Manea, who is now living in New York, still keeps feeling “nowhere”. “I have partially estranged myself from the one I was before, surprised at what I am becoming”, he has recently confessed in an interview. Yet the writer, who had to leave Ceausescu's Rumania, today does not only feel “the bitterness, but also the privilege of being in exile”, for, as he says:

An exile embodies one of the dramatic contradictions of our time: between cosmopolitan, centrifugal modernity and a centripetal need of, or nostalgia for, belonging. (3)

If the coexistence of “cosmopolitan, centrifugal modernity” and “a centripetal need of, or nostalgia for, belonging” constitutes “one of the dramatic contradictions of our time”, there is no doubt that this contradictory spiritual condition has been peculiarly familiar to the whole Jewish diasporic experience — a centuries' long experience of living as a minority within a larger majority world, at the crossroads of cultures, but without rejecting one's sense of centripetal belonging. From a cultural point of view, a Jewish exile moving from one land to another has been, at least partially, better equipped for the process of metamorphosis that exile implies, since the category itself of living in exile pre-existed the new, or rather, real exile experience in his mental horizon. Yet this statement should not be stretched

too far. Exile as a mythical category is one thing. Immigration and exile (for a clear definition of the difference, see Wisse 43) as personal experiences of uprooting from one's own native country, world and language and adjusting to a new environment and language are, indeed, a different thing.

This paper will show the surprising and imaginative way in which Yiddish American writer Isaac Bashevis Singer conveyed the experience of travelling from the Old World to the New one and the following exile adventure. We shall see how he described the transition between two cultures and man's metamorphosis in that process — an experience of passing, conflicts and transformation which is at the very heart of American culture as a whole.

2. ACROSS THE OCEAN

It was only in 1945, ten years after his arrival in the U.S., that Bashevis Singer published a short story about the crossing from the Old World to the New one. As far as I know, that was the first time he was dealing, albeit partially, with the American experience, seen, as it will always be in his future texts, from the point of view of a refugee.

That was a real turning point in his writing career, the more so if we consider that just two years earlier he had published a fundamental essay, "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America"¹, claiming the impossibility for a Yiddish writer to deal with life in America in his mother tongue. This impossibility was due to the fact that Yiddish in America had become an "obsolete" language (5), unable to express the "rich and varied" American life (6). If up to then "good prose works describing American Jewish life" had been "rare", that was because Yiddish itself had become "an insurmountable barrier" (7). Yiddish in America was "only partially functional. Weapons from a museum will not do in a modern blitzkrieg" (7). Thus, with his peculiar black humor, the writer commented on the decreasing power of Yiddish words, which each day lost "more freshness and authenticity" and smelt "more and more of the past and of otherworldliness (if one can so put it)" (7). Across the ocean the Yiddish writer's mother

tongue was becoming “less and less vital, more and more outmoded” (7). “Words”, Singer remarked in a moving passage from that essay, “like people, sometimes endure a severe disorientation when they emigrate, and often they remain forever helpless and not quite themselves. This is precisely what happened to Yiddish in America.” (8)

The essay finished with a passage summing up the decay of the Yiddish language in touching words:

Our mother tongue has grown old. The mother is already a grandmother and a great grandmother. She wandered with us from Germany to Poland, Russia, Rumania. Now she is in America, but in spirit she still lives in the old country — in her memories. She is beginning to forget her own language, mixing in many corrupted English words, making comical mistakes and confusing one language with the other. However, this is only when she tries to be modern, to keep pace with the times and show her worldliness. When she starts talking about the past (through the mouth of a true talent), pearls drop from her lips. She remembers what happened fifty years ago better and more clearly than what happened this morning. (12)

Just two years after this “manifesto” (Roskies 2) of his, advocating the need for the Yiddish American writer to go back to the well of the past for his own sources and lamenting the plight of the same writer when dealing with America, two years after this controversial essay, whose views the editors of the magazine in which it was published declared not to share, just two years later the short story we referred to earlier was published: the first short story by Bashevis Singer dealing with the experience of going across the ocean toward the New World and adjusting to the new reality.

“Die kleyne shusterleck”, in English “The Little Shoemakers”, was published in Yiddish in 1945, like “Short Friday”, “The Wife Killer” and “Gimpel the Fool”. That was one year after his older brother Israel Joshua's death and two years after the publication of his first extraordinary series of demonic tales, through which he had been able to find his narrative voice again, for the first time so successfully after the traumatic experience of immigration. It was at the end of that highly dramatic period, 1943-1945, a key period in his evolution as a writer, when the United States had got

involved in the war against nazifascism and the Jewish European world from which the writer came was being tragically destroyed — a context of dramatic events that Bashevis was following with great concern, as the newspaper articles published by him in *Forverts* in that same period clearly show — that his first story dealing with immigration to America was born. The story would be translated into English by Isaac Rosenfeld and included in the first fundamental English collection of Bashevis Singer's stories, *Gimpel the Fool*, which came out in 1953.

This seminal text, subdivided into six chapters, chronicles the centuries' long story of a family of shoemakers living in the Polish town of Frampol from some time after Chmielnitzki's pogroms in the seventeenth century, up to the dramatic emigration of the latest descendant of the family and his settlement in the New World at the outbreak of the Second World War.

In the first chapter of the story (“The Shoemakers and Their Family Tree”) we can follow the genealogy of the little shoemakers from the founder, whose house on the hill “remained standing until just the other day” (89), up to the last descendant, old Abba and his seven children. The chronicle is at the same time full of precise realistic details and maintains a kind of Biblical tone in its rhythm of generations following one after the other, in an uninterrupted chain of continuity. Hard work, respect for the law and inner harmony characterize the life of old Abba, whose sense of stability and being at home in the world is beautifully conveyed by these words:

He knew that the wide world was full of strange cities and distant lands, that Frampol was actually no bigger than a dot in a small prayer book; but it seemed to him that his little town was the navel of the universe and that his own house stood at the very center. (94)

After a second chapter in which we have more details about Abba Shuster's family and about a world where the little shoemaker felt there was “nothing to change” (99), it is in the third chapter of the story (“Gimpel Emigrates to America”) that this universe of order and traditions is suddenly shaken by the rebellion of Abba's eldest son, for whom all that world of small

towns is, as we unexpectedly discover, “nothing but a stinking swamp” (100). Gimpel decides to go to America, and some months after his arrival there he sends his first letter home, from which we get the first surprising news about the crossing and about New York (“the houses reach into the clouds. The trains go over the roofs”, 102-103), and an expression summarizing the first impact: “*all right*” (103). A picture the son sends to his parents in his third letter, showing him at his own wedding with his bride, an immigrant from Rumania, astonishes the whole family and community of friends and neighbours:

Abba could not believe it. His son was wearing a gentleman's coat and a high hat. The bride was dressed like a countess in a white dress [...]. Pasha [Abba's wife] took one look at the snapshot and began to cry. Gimpel's brothers gaped. Neighbors came running, and friends from all over town: they could have sworn that Gimpel had been spirited away by magic to a land of gold, where he had taken a princess to wife — just as in the storybooks the pack merchants brought to town. (103)

The magic metamorphosis of the poor chap into a prince makes its lasting effect on the younger generation. “To make a long story short” (103), as Singer summarizes with his usual humor and ability as a storyteller, one after the other each of the seven brothers is induced to go to America, and their parents, who do not want to leave their *shtetl*, are left alone in Frampol.

Old Abba is still shown in his *shtetl* forty years later, now completely alone, in the fourth section of the story, in which we are witness to the invasion of Poland by Hitler (“ — may his name vanish! — ”) and his “legions of barbarians”, and to the bombing and sack of Frampol (107). The tremendous roar which Abba hears when nazi planes start bombing Frampol is first interpreted by him as being the blast of the Messiah's trumpet. The unexpected sack of Frampol — described in a concise style, with short sentences, accumulating series of coherent details, as is typical of Singer's writing — brings about Abba's sudden, dramatic decision of leaving his beloved *shtetl*, just before his house catches fire. The apocalyptic scene of the departure is charged with symbolic meaning: “The walls collapsed. Abba turned about and saw the shelf of sacred books go up in flames. The blackened pages turned in the air, glowing with fiery letters like the Torah

given to the Jews on Mount Sinai.” (p. 109)

“Across the Ocean” is the title of the fifth section of the story, in which Singer recounts the transformation of Abba's life into “wandering into the world” (109). This is the section which is particularly interesting for us, as it deals with the moment of crossing from the Old World to the New, and it does so in a fascinating way. The stormy crossing on board the ship going to the United States is described with powerful words, combining realistic and visionary elements together. The crossing experience seems to be an experience of “returning to original chaos” (112) — a leitmotif conveying man's crisis in Bashevis Singer's narrative world. The theme of spiritual impoverishment and total confusion is announced in the first part of the journey chronicle by the detail of the loss of old Abba's phylacteries and prayer shawls, among the very few things he had saved, together with his work tools, from the burning of Frampol — an event which meaningfully brings about the character's loss of all sense of time, and his inability to distinguish “between Sabbath and weekdays” (111). Yet, even in that difficult situation of solitude and disorder, the little shoemaker's mind is continuously crossed by memories of similar situations from the Bible, and it is this rich texture of Biblical references which sustains the character (and the writer with him) and allows him to find, or try to find, a meaning in that chaos.

The transit experience from one world to the other is described with powerful images, drawn from the culture of the Hebrew Bible, transforming the voyage into an experience of plunging into original chaos and creation, as in the Book of Genesis, jumping like the hills of Jerusalem in the Psalmists' words, witnessing the miraculous Parting of the Waters as in Israel's escape from Egypt, lying in the belly of the whale and praying God for deliverance like prophet Jonah, or crossing a dangerous and “limitless desert, crawling with serpents, monsters and dragons, as it is written in Deuteronomy” (112). Yet, at the same time, all these mythical images are continuously alternated and supported by all sorts of realistic details, from the immigrant's vomiting to his fainting and losing balance on board the rocking ship: man is a whole, there is no separation between his body and his mind, between the natural and the supernatural.

One of the climaxes of the short story is the one in which the arrival experience and the encounter with the New World are told. The coming into New York harbor and the first vision of New York skyscrapers: all this is, of course, a *topos* of all American immigrants' literature, which we find in dozens of other texts, also within the Jewish American tradition. Bashevis Singer's contribution to this vast anthology of micro-texts about the arrival is, in itself, a little classic of the American literature created by American immigrants. The page deserves to be read directly, to fully appreciate the variety of coexisting motifs:

Just as he was unable to remember when he began his voyage, so he was unaware when it came to an end. The ship had already been made fast to the dock in New York harbor, but Abba hadn't the vaguest notion of this. He saw huge buildings and towers, but mistook them for the pyramids of Egypt. A tall man in a white hat came into the cabin and shouted something at him, but he remained motionless. At last they helped him dress and led him out on deck, where his sons and daughters-in-law and grandchildren were waiting. Abba was bewildered; a crowd of Polish landowners, counts and countesses, gentile boys and girls, leaped at him, hugged him, and kissed him, crying out in a strange language, which was both Yiddish and not Yiddish. They half led, half carried him away, and placed him in a car. Other cars arrived, packed with Abba's kinfolk, and they set out, speeding like shot arrows over bridges, rivers and roofs. Buildings rose up and receded, as if by magic, some of the buildings touching the sky. Whole cities lay spread out before him; Abba thought of Pithom and Rameses. The car sped so fast, it seemed to him the people in the streets were moving backward. The air was full of thunder and lightning; a banging and trumpeting, it was a wedding and a conflagration at once. The nations had gone wild, a heathen festival...

His sons were crowding around him. He saw them as in a fog and did not know them. Short men with white hair. They shouted, as if he were deaf.

"Im Gimpel!"

"Getzel!"

"Feivel!"

The old man closed his eyes and made no answer. Their voice ran together; everything was turning pell-mell, topsy-turvy. Suddenly he thought of Jacob arriving in Egypt, when he was met by Pharaoh's chariots. He felt, he had lived through the same experience in a previous incarnation. His beard began to tremble; a hoarse sob rose from his chest. A forgotten passage from the Bible stuck in his gullet. (113-114)

In the little shoemaker's confusion - he doesn't even realize when the voyage is over; in his immediate perception of America as a new Egypt, with New York skyscrapers mistaken for the pyramids; in his bewilderment at the sight of his own family, transformed into a crowd of assimilated Polish landowners; in the mixture of familiarity and estrangement in their voices and in their half-Yiddish; in the topsy-turvy turning together of everything, as if the "nations had gone wild", Bashevis Singer is offering his first powerful attempt at describing the encounter with the New World, where he had already been living for ten years.

"The Little Shoemakers" ends up, in its sixth and last section (meaningfully called "The American Heritage"), with the happy ending of Abba's recovery from his confusion and bewilderment in the New World (previously described in notes full of humorous remarks and situations, communicating the sense of wonder which is substantial in Singer's vision). This recovery takes place when the old immigrant unexpectedly finds his shoemaker's tools and starts working again, and all his seven children, one after the other, join their father at their little shoemakers' desks. Old Abba realizes that deep within them also his children had remained what they were, without becoming, "praise God", "idolaters in Egypt. They had not forgotten their heritage, nor had they lost themselves among the unworthy" (119). So the whole story ends up as a family romance of spiritual survival and salvation across the ocean. On the last page, father and sons are shown all together, while working at their shoemakers' desks and singing a Yiddish song from the Old World, whose last words, with which the story finishes, are: "*Oh, Lord, Judele!*" (119). Tradition can go on, even across the ocean. The little Jew can survive, not only physically but also spiritually, and, as in the dream of all newcomers, begin a new life in the New World, without having to forfeit his "heritage".

3. A NAKED SOUL

The "wandering into the world" motif was faced by Bashevis Singer in other texts as well, published in that same fundamental period of his writing, at the end of World War II. I am here referring specifically to the

final pages of his perhaps most famous story, “Gimpel tam”, in English “Gimpel the Fool”, and to *Die familye Mushkat*, in English, *The Family Moskat*, the big family saga and large historical canvas depicting XXth century Jewish life in Poland up to the nazi invasion, a novel where the American theme runs through under the surface, in a less evident way, and with quite a different, much more realistic treatment. Both works were published in the same year as “The Little Shoemakers” (the serialized publication of *Die familye Mushkat* in *Forverts* actually lasted for three years, from 1945 to 1948). It was indeed with this group of texts that the Yiddish writer was finally able to build himself a bridge across the ocean, which, after much suffering and bafflement, would allow him to start facing creatively the reality of the New World as well. Five years later, in 1950, *The Family Moskat* came out in English and that first translation of a work of his marked the beginning of Singer’s fortune with English speaking readers and his first official passport into American culture.

Many years after those early American beginnings, around the time of the writer’s world acknowledgement testified to by his receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, the immigrant’s experience of departure, transit and arrival from the Old World to the New American one was once again described at great length, and in very personal terms, in the third part of Singer’s late autobiographical volume *Love and Exile*, upon which we shall now focus our attention.² In the Author’s Note to this “spiritual autobiography”, the last sentence reads: “In God’s archive, in His divine computer, nothing is ever lost” [VII] — a statement which perfectly counterbalances the human experience described in the rest of this memoir. What Bashevis Singer actually tells in his autobiography is, in fact, the spiritual adventure of a member of what one could call “the Yiddish lost generation”.

“Lost” is a keyword in *Love and Exile*. The third and last part of the volume, totally devoted to a telling of the writer’s decision to leave Poland and go to the United States and to a description of his own crossing, arrival and first experiences in the New World, is actually called *Lost in America*. The word “lost” is already present at the very beginning of this third part, in the opening sentence defining the young man’s spiritual condition of crisis

when still in Warsaw: At the onset of the 1930's, my disillusionment with myself reached a stage in which I had lost all hope." (183) The novel concludes by showing the despair of the young immigrant in the New World, and ends on a final note of total loss: "I am lost in America, lost for ever." (352) *Farloyrene menshn*, lost souls, were usually called, according to Irving Howe (77), the first Yiddish-speaking immigrants who had come to America in the 1880's-1890's. In Singer this feeling of loss had already found its narrative expression in an impressive series of short stories dealing with the American experience, and in novels such as *Enemies* or *The Penitent*. Even in such an early novel as *The Family Moskat*, an Americanized Polish immigrant had been described as having "lost everything — his wife, his children, the world to come" (476). In the autobiographical novel, however, the immigrant's experience — of exile and loss — becomes a dominant theme, to be explored in all its depth and variety of feelings.

It is particularly interesting to follow the surprising way in which Singer describes the moment of transition between the two worlds. Once on board the ship going to America, the immigrant first gets lost and then finds himself alone in his dark, windowless cabin. At this point his feeling of estrangement from his past and his condition of waiting for a metamorphosis are conveyed through a striking metaphor: "I was what the cabala calls a naked soul — a soul which has departed one body and awaits another." (230) The experience of passing from one life to another is communicated with a death-and-rebirth image, whose source is here explicitly ascribed to Jewish mystical culture, the culture Singer had been brought up on, which had shaped his mind and could support him, with its wealth of insights and metaphors, even in describing totally new experiences, like the American one. The image of the naked soul, so deeply touching and powerful in conveying the transit experience between two lives, belongs to a broader system of metaphors used by Bashevis Singer to describe man's feelings of loss, entanglement, disorientation and confusion, when out in what he has often called the "world of chaos".³ If on the one hand this image is connected to the notion of one's being lost between different worlds and of one's older self's death, on the other hand, that same cabalistic metaphor hints at the existence of a deeper essence, of a spiritual core which cannot be lost, even when the sinner is transmuting from one life experience to another.

When we look into the metaphor of the naked soul more closely, we find out that the nakedness of the soul can be related to its "Forgetfulness". While reflecting upon a "temporary attack of amnesia", the immigrant wonders whether that forgetting was what happened to the soul directly following death (230). In the context of the mental confusion which is then being described, it is even an element of comfort to discover in oneself the same experiences of disorder and lack of orientation which one had already experienced in one's former life: "My demons had not abandoned me. They were accompanying me to America." (231)

In Singer, the waiting for a new life is not marked by the innocent expectation of a better world. Quite opposite from what we have in the strikingly different autobiography of Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912)⁴; with Singer one knows that, after the crossing, and even more so, one will still be in exile.

4. CATASTROPHE AND MUTATION

Once arrived in America, it is the whole world around the immigrant which seems to be taking part in some kind of apocalyptic metamorphosis, impossible to describe: "I could feel that some mental catastrophe was taking place here, some mutation for which there was no name in my vocabulary, not even a beginning of a notion" (252). As in many situations of Singer's narrative world, it is "chaos" that man actually experiences when trying to move around the world. Total disorientation, estrangement, both from oneself and the world, death feelings ("I was a corpse", 258), or the sensation of going back in one's life and being "reverted to boyhood" (259): these are, in Singer's narrative, some of the psychological experiences suffered from by the newly arrived immigrant, together with a general impression of bewilderment: "Doors opened and closed on their own", "The clang and clamor deafened my ears" (261)...

A very interesting part of Singer's autobiography is devoted to his difficulties as a writer in his encounter with the New World. This is also part of the arrival experience and it deserves special attention. In his memoir,

Bashevis Singer attributes to his brother Israel Joshua the sort of serious complaints concerning the plight of the Yiddish writer in America that he himself had powerfully written about in his essay of 1943. So once again we hear about the impossibility of describing life in America for a Yiddish writer, whose language didn't even have words for what he could see there; besides, the speed with which life kept continuously changing in America, the rootlessness of the country, seemed to make the birth of literature, even in English, impossible. Finally there was the difficulty of describing the world of the immigrants, in which father and son would speak different languages, and often the father himself had already "half-forgotten" (261) his own mother-tongue. Bashevis Singer then describes his own difficulties as a writer in the years following his immigration, and he does so with the sort of humor which never leaves him, particularly when describing the tricks played by mysterious demonic forces against man. Here the "strange force withi" him is also called a "literary dybbuk", that was "sabotaging" his "efforts", an inner enemy that "outwitted me with his tricks" (270-71). He would feel sleepy as soon as he started writing, made errors in spelling, would make a mess with his newly bought typewriter, his fountain pen would start leaking and leaving ugly spots. He was unable to write.

There was an element of suicide in this self-sabotage, but what was the source of it? [...] My coming to America had demoted me in a way, thrown me back to the ordeal of the beginner in writing, in love, in my struggle for independence. I had a taste of what it would be for someone to be born old and to grow younger with the years instead of older, diminishing constantly in rank, in experience, in courage, in wisdom of maturity. (271)

Being born old, with a long tradition and a culture, and a language with which to express oneself; and becoming younger with the years, unable to speak and write. This was the initial condition of the immigrant, who would eventually proclaim, in the climactical final scene of this autobiographical novel, his being "lost in America".

5. EXILE AND THE STARRY SKY

Yet against this background of loss, and even in this text describing a critical existential experience, there is a chain of opposite images and feelings which seem partially to contradict what we have been saying up to now. I am particularly referring to the moving and frequent passages in Bashevis Singer's autobiography where the writer recollects his looking out at the starry sky and communicates through those visions his own sense of cosmic balance and universal belonging.

I will select some of those scenes to offer evidence of what I am saying. Toward the beginning of *Love and Exile*, when the autobiographic character on his way to America is on a train and already experiences feelings of estrangement while looking at the familiar villages near Warsaw he is leaving, it is the sight of the stars that leads his thoughts to the opposite perception, of a more universal human rootedness.

I sat by the window looking out at the dense darkness, and from time to time, glanced up at the stars. I wasn't leaving *them*. The universe rode along with me. I recognized the shapes of the constellations. (224)

Further on, when on board the ship carrying him to the United States, after all his experiences of loss and confusion, it is by looking up at the sky "thickly sprinkled with stars" (232) that the immigrant senses a feeling of belonging and stability, similar to the one usually attributed to more traditional characters in their *shtetl*.

Here, heaven and earth weren't separate and distant from each other but merged into a single cosmic entity, endowed with an otherworldly light. I stood in the center of the universe [...]. The sound of the waves fused into a monotonous roar, a seething, a foaming, a splashing that didn't weary the ear or the brain. God spoke a single word, awesome and eternal. (232)

Even while wandering across the world, man can still hear God's voice and indeed feel at the centre of the universe.

What will happen then in America? One night in the summer, when the immigrant's sense of isolation is growing and, unable to sleep, he goes "outside for a breath of fresh air", once again the lonely man is not disappointed by looking up in the sky: "the sky was full of stars. God, or whoever He is, was still there, observing His Creation." (p. 347) God is still there, but his creature, lost in the world, is no longer able to understand his messages:

I lifted up my eyes to the starry sky again and again as if in hope that some revelation might descend upon me from above. I inhaled the cold air and shivered. (347)

At the end of Bashevis Singer's memoir, after describing a grotesque situation in which the character finds himself entangled, the last desperate words of loss concluding the novel are meaningfully cried out in the night by a city window when no stars can be seen above: "Then I went over to the window, opened it, and looked out into the wet street, its black windows, flat roofs, the glowing sky, without a moon, without stars, opaque and stagnant like some global cover." (352) The sky is no longer sending its message of meaning, there is no mysterious formula to decipher. In a supreme, grotesque effort to get in touch with the sky and the world outside, the lonely inhabitant of the American city leans out of the window as far as he can, but he can only deeply inhale "the fumes of the city". Only at this point does the newly arrived immigrant proclaim to himself "and to the powers of the night" his being lost in the country of his exile, "lost forever" (352).

6. IN EXILE: MODERNITY AND BELONGING

At the beginning of this paper I mentioned Norman Manea's description of the exile experience as embodying "one of the dramatic contradictions of our time: between cosmopolitan, centrifugal modernity and a centripetal need of, or nostalgia for, belonging". In Bashevis Singer's world, coming back home, towards one's balance and meaning, has two possible directions. It means going back to the shtetl, to the small microcosm

out of which much of his wealth of narrative materials, metaphors, legends, characters and stories, come from. The other direction is towards the cosmos. The centripetal force, driving back toward the small *shtetl* of one's spiritual origin, does not contradict, in Singer's writing, the centrifugal force, when man is able to experience a feeling of *cosmic* belonging. A life of piety allows Abba to feel at the center of the universe while living in his little village, as little as a dot in the book of the larger world. A similar sensation can be shared by the lost old man going by ship to America or even, though intermittently, by the lonely greenhorn in New York. But when this capacity of getting in touch with the sky above is lost, when man loses his inner balance and his sense of unity with some higher, universal presence, only then will man feel, deep within, in exile,⁵ wherever he is.

7. SHOULD YENTL GO TO AMERICA? THE METAMORPHOSIS OF A STORY

I will conclude these notes about "travel and metamorphosis" in Bashevis Singer with a story about the "metamorphosis" of one of Singer's own stories.

When Barbra Streisand made her *Yentl* film based on Bashevis Singer's story "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy", the writer got very angry at the conclusion of the film, which had taken the liberty of having Yentl come over to America, at the end of her experiences of yearning for studying. For Barbra Streisand, a daughter of immigrant Jews, the natural solution to a story of pre-feminist emancipation could not be but AMERICA; for Isaac Bashevis Singer, himself an immigrant, what sense could there be in making a girl, whose passion was for learning and spiritual achievement, come to the New World? Only the Old World would be the right place for such a would-be religious scholar.

This contrast, beside concerning the relationship between a writer and his text and a film-maker and her film, epitomizes one aspect of the tension "New World vs. Old World", naturally inherent in any immigrant's or exile's condition.

But let us listen to Bashevis Singer's own words, in the witty interview about the film the writer made to... himself for *The New York Times*:

Let's imagine a scriptwriter who decides that Mme. Bovary should end up taking a cruise along the Riviera or that Anna Karenina should marry an American millionaire instead of committing suicide, and Dostoyevski's Rashkolnikov should become a Wall Street broker instead of going to Siberia. This is what Miss Streisand did by making Yentl, whose greatest passion was the Torah, go on a ship to America, singing at the top of her lungs. Why would she decide to go to America? Weren't there enough yeshivas in Poland or in Lithuania where she could continue to study? Was going to America Miss Streisand's idea of a happy ending for Yentl? What would Yentl have done in America? Worked in a sweatshop 12 hours a day where there is no time for learning? Would she try to marry a salesman in New York, move to the Bronx or to Brooklyn and rent an apartment with an icebox and a dumbwaiter? This kitsch ending summarizes all the faults of the adaptation. (225-226)

As we can see, old immigrant Bashevis was really furious with young Barbara, a daughter's age, for her impertinence and total lack of understanding about the relationship between the two worlds across the ocean.

Yet it is Bashevis Singer himself who, when in a more amiable mood, might offer a different solution to the problem raised by "Miss Streisand". It would be enough to listen to another character of his, a religious man from the Hasidic world, who still in Warsaw, in the midst of the nazi invasion, is asked about escaping to America. This observant Jew, Moshe Gabriel, first wonders: "What would I do in America?". But then he adds: "Still who knows? What was it the rabbi of Kotsk said - 'The Torah wanders.' One day it may even come there." (*Family Moskat* 467)



Note, Notes, Anmerkungen



1) As pointed out by David Roskies in his excellent introduction to the first English translation of this essay (Roskies 2), Singer's 1943 essay was never

reprinted in Yiddish nor did it ever appear in English before 1989.

2) About I.B. Singer's "autobiographical obsessions", see Chone Shmeruk 29, 28-36. For a broad discussion of Jewish-American autobiographies, see William Boelhower and Regine Rosenthal. Theoretic remarks in Alessandra Contenti.

3) For more about this topic, see my introduction to Singer's work, XXVI-XXXV.

4) See in particular the exciting conclusion of Mary Antin's autobiography, in the chapter entitled "The Heritage", 359-364.

5) For a masterly exploration of the exile theme, see Claudio Magris's criticism, starting from his *Lontano da dove*.



Opere Citate, Works Cited



Zitierte Literatur

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