

SESSION SIX



Master of Yiddish, “The wise and
humble language of us all”:
*Isaac in America: A Journey with
Isaac Bashevis Singer*

Documentary, 1986
Director: Amran Nowak
Narrator: Judd Hirsch

Length: 58 minutes

Young boy in audience: *When did you begin to write?*

Singer: *When I was born my mother asked the midwife, “Is it a girl or a boy?” The midwife said, “Neither one. It’s a writer.”*

On screen, Isaac Bashevis Singer has the wit and timing of a stand-up comic, as he answers questions about matters small and profound. With his twinkling blue eyes and impish manner, his English accented with the sound and syntax of Eastern Europe, the self-effacing Nobel Prize winning author charms his audiences – and his readers.

Interlacing interviews and scenes from Singer’s daily life with one of his autobiographical stories, “A Day in Coney Island,” this documentary film presents a lively profile of the Yiddish writer’s life and work. Singer, usually dressed in a somber dark suit and white shirt, is seen in his milieu: his cluttered study, favorite cafeteria, Upper West Side Manhattan streets, and offices of the *Forward*, the Yiddish newspaper that published his work until his death in 1991. As excerpts of the short story are dramatically read, he revisits his old Brooklyn haunts: the beachfront community of Seagate where he lived when he first arrived in America and the Coney Island boardwalk.

If anyone can be said to represent Yiddish in America, it is Isaac Bashevis Singer. His novels, novellas, short stories, and memoirs – written in Yiddish and translated into English as well as fifteen other languages – are renowned far beyond the Jewish community. He contributed to several newspaper columns a week, some under pseudonyms, and serializations of his novels frequently appeared in magazines. Several years after his death, his publishing career continues to flourish. The publication of his three latest posthumous novels brings the total number of his books to over forty. Translations of other still-unpublished works of fiction and nonfiction are under way.

But it is not the sheer volume of his work that makes Singer so impressive or explains why this Yiddish writer

Singer: *Since I write about Yiddish-speaking people, I'm limited in my choices. I can't suddenly begin to write about an oil millionaire in Texas . . . But this limitation has enriched me. I said to myself, these [Jews] are my people . . . my literary gold mine.*

captured the imagination of the American public. Whether writing about Polish mystics or New York socialists, Singer is, first and foremost, a master storyteller. He has been called a magician. His words are chosen with great care and his sentences sparkle.

Singer brings to life a world and way of life that is no more. But his view is not a sweet and sentimental one. Singer stories are peopled by scholars, prostitutes, demons, rabbis, thieves, false messiahs, housewives, philosophers, and simple people. Some are drawn from Jewish folklore, others from his own imagination or memories of stories he heard as a child. His characters in Eastern Europe as well as his refugees in America grapple with the complexities of issues like religion, modernity, morality, and love. A typical Singer hero is propelled, and haunted, by his passions.

As the story “A Day in Coney Island” depicts, the beginning of this Yiddish writer’s literary career in America was filled with struggle. His international success was to come much later.

A great strength of *Isaac in America* – an Academy Award nominee for best documentary feature – is the opportunity it affords viewers to encounter the Nobel laureate. Suggesting that his stories are best read aloud, the poet and literary critic Eliezer Greenberg wrote in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* that “Singer has to be heard to be believed.”

Early Life: From the Old World to the New

Born in 1904 in Leoncin, Poland, Isaac Bashevis Singer spent most of his youth in Warsaw, with frequent visits to the small town where his grandfather, the Bilgoray rabbi, lived. His father held a rabbinical court in their home on Krochmalna Street, which Singer has written about in his memoir *In My Father's Court* (1966). He writes: “This book tells the story of a family and a rabbinical court that were so close together it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began.”

His education was traditional; he attended a rabbinical seminary where he also studied secular subjects. To his parents’ displeasure, only one of their three sons, Isaac’s brother Moshe, followed a religious path (he was killed

Today I know exactly what I should have done that summer – my work. But then I wrote almost nothing. “Who needs Yiddish in America?” I asked myself. Though the editor of a Yiddish paper published a sketch of mine from time to time in the Sunday edition, he told me frankly that no one gave a boot about demons, dybbuks, and imps of two hundred years ago. At thirty, a refugee from Poland, I had become an anachronism.

– from “A Day in Coney Island”

in the Holocaust). His older brother, Israel Joshua, also became a secular writer, whose celebrated career was cut short by his premature death in 1944. An older sister, Hinda Esther, was also a Yiddish writer, but little has been written about her. In 1991, one of her autobiographical short stories was published in translation in *Lilith* magazine. Esther Kreitman (her married name) died in the 1960s.

It was Israel Joshua Singer who had the greatest influence on his brother’s career. In fact, some critics say it is necessary to understand I.J. Singer’s work in order to appreciate the work of I.B. Singer. I.J. Singer’s best-known work is *The Brothers Ashkenazi* (1936), a Jewish family saga set in Lodz. In *The Brothers Singer* (1983), British journalist and novelist Clive Sinclair writes that “Bashevis is thought to be a prodigal son by many of his peers, while Joshua is thought of as a lost champion.”

In his Nobel Prize address, Singer refers to his late brother as his “master.” He told Sinclair that when he began writing in Poland, his brother encouraged him and gave him rules (Singer shares similar advice with young people in the documentary). “When you write tell a story, and don’t try to explain the story. If you say that a boy fell in love with a girl you don’t have to explain to the reader why a boy falls in love, the reader knows just as much about love as you do or more so.”

The younger Singer had his literary debut in 1925, with the publication of his story “Oyf der Elter” (“In Old Age”) in *Literarische Bleter* (*Literary Pages*) in Warsaw. To avoid confusion with his brother, he began signing his name Isaac Bashevis, derived from his mother’s first name. I.B. Singer referred to his brother’s death as “the greatest misfortune of my entire life. . . . I never really recovered from this blow.” But it was after I.J. Singer’s death that I.B. Singer’s literary career blossomed.

Publishing History: The Stories, Books, Prizes

In 1935, I.B. Singer moved to New York, and he became a U.S. citizen in 1943. “I didn’t run away from my roots. I took them with me,” he has said. As in Warsaw, his brother helped him get established as a writer, getting his pieces published in the *Forward*. As Singer explains in

the film, the *Forward* was good to him. For more than fifty years, he published there regularly: fiction as Isaac Bashevis Singer, serious journalism under the name Y. Varshavski, and lighter pieces as D. Segal. Sometimes, when publishing novels in serialization, he would amend his planned endings based on readers' reactions.

Soon after his story "Gimpel the Fool" was published in *Partisan Review*, translated by Saul Bellow, in 1953, other Singer stories began to appear in *The New Yorker* and *Commentary*. Even though his English was quite good (and better than he liked to let on), he worked with a translator. Very involved in the translation of his work, Singer would go over the words again and again until they came up with the right phrase. Some of those who worked with him were noted authors themselves, such as Saul Bellow and Laurie Colwin.

Beginning in the 1950s, his novels and collections of stories were published in English, and his American readership grew. All of his stories appeared first in the *Forward* in Yiddish, and there was always a lag time between that and later English publication in a book. The first English publication was *The Family Moskat* – a novel about a family in Warsaw that resounds with many of the themes discussed earlier in this course – in 1950 by Alfred A. Knopf. Most of his subsequent books were published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, beginning with *Satan in Goray* (1955). A steady stream of novels and short story collections followed, including such titles as *The Magician of Lublin* (1960), *The Spinoza of Market Street* (1961), *Shosha* (1978), *A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories* (1973), *Lost in America* (1979), *The Death of Methuselah* (1988), and *Meshugah* (1994). Singer won the National Book Award twice, in 1970 and 1974.

In later years, his English readers outnumbered their Yiddish counterparts. In fact, it was as though Singer was writing for two separate audiences: the Yiddish readers who might not have been sophisticated but knew a lot about Jewish history and culture (and would reprimand him in letters if he made a mistake about a Jewish law or the name of a street), and the English readers (as well as those who read Singer in French, German, and other languages) who knew little about Jewish life but much

Singer: *I would say memory is the most important thing of a writer. . . . It is the nature of the real writer that he needs an address. He needs very badly an address. These are his roots.*

about literature. Many critics have expressed the opinion that his latest books lack the strength of his earlier works, that the stories and novels dealing with prewar Polish Jewry are his best.

When the author was sixty-two an old friend who worked as a children's book editor convinced the author to write his first book for kids. *Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories* was published to much acclaim, and Singer wrote twelve other children's books on Jewish themes, illustrated by noted artists. His children's books have a more optimistic tone than his books for adults. In his acceptance speech when he won the National Book Award for *A Day of Pleasure*, he listed ten reasons he writes for children (and repeated this in a speech at a Nobel Prize banquet). His first reason: "Children read books, not reviews. They don't give a hoot about the critics."

In 1962 his novel *The Slave* became a best seller. Two of Singer's stories have been made into major feature films: Barbra Streisand's *Yentl* and Paul Mazursky's *Enemies, A Love Story*. Roger Straus, Singer's long-time publisher and friend, told Paul Kresh, who wrote a biography of Singer entitled, *The Magician of West 86th Street*, that "Fame was a long time coming to Isaac. I've never known anyone who enjoyed it more, or let it affect him less."

As Kresh reports, when Singer learned that he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978, he first questioned whether it might be a mistake, and then proceeded to eat breakfast before returning home to face the press. "What do you think," he asked his wife Alma, who broke the news to him, "we can stop eating because of happiness?"

Singer travelled to Oslo to collect his prize with his wife, publisher, editor at the *Forward*, and others. His address to the Swedish Academy concluded:

Yiddish has not yet said its last word. It contains treasures that have not been revealed to the eyes of the world. It was the tongue of martyrs and saints, of dreamers and Kabbalists – rich in humor and in memories that mankind may never forget. In a figurative way, Yiddish is the wise and humble language of us all, the idiom of frightened and hopeful humanity.

The Yiddish Nobel Laureate: A Career in Perspective

Singer said that three conditions were necessary in order

Singer: *Of course in my age there's more to look back than to look forward to. Still, I'm looking forward too, because tomorrow I intend to sit down and write another story. The story itself might look back. But I'm looking forward to the story.*

for him to write a story: a plot, the passion to write the particular story, and “the illusion that I am the only one who can write such a story.”

For a Yiddish writer, Singer broke all kinds of new ground, writing about subjects previously taboo. His narrative voice swings easily from the sacred to the sexual, from this world to the supernatural. Literary critic and scholar Irving Howe, in *The World of Our Fathers*, points out that although Singer wrote in Yiddish, he was quite apart from the traditions of Yiddishkeit. Among Yiddish writers, he was not universally praised. In 1960 the poet Jacob Gladstein criticized the author, saying that a Singer story “reads better . . . in English than the original Yiddish.” Many critics believe that this criticism was portrayed in Cynthia Ozick’s story, “Envy; or Yiddish in America.”

Singer’s own experiences, as a skeptical yeshivah student in Poland and as a refugee on the outside of America, form the basis of his stories. “In all my writing,” he would say, “I tell the story of my life again and again.” Insisting that all literature is autobiographical, he explained that “If it didn’t happen, it might have happened.” The clashes he witnessed – and felt – between tradition and renewal, religious piety and free thought, Europe and America, pulsate in his characters. Although he was no longer traditionally religious in his outlook, his stories have much to say about the nature of Judaism and what it means to be a Jew in the modern world.

Many of the stories and novels have an air of mystery about them, with a chain of distinctly Singeresque entanglements, surprises, and passionate connections. The Nobel Laureate preferred that his messages be obscure. As he states in the documentary, “You read the story. You create your own message. I don’t have to do everything for you.”

Singer never returned to his native Poland, although he was invited on several occasions. In declining an invitation from a Polish writer’s group, he told them: “It would be for me a terrible emotional strain to see Poland without my people, without those who were close to me and who have perished for sins they never committed.”

He spent his final years in New York City – where he could be seen frequently on the streets and in the coffee

shops of the Upper West Side – wintered in Miami Beach, and travelled frequently to give lectures and receive awards. Yet his life-style probably changed little from his early days in New York, when he was an unknown writer, struggling to make a living. He continued to write stories, telling one interviewer in 1980 that he had “more stories than I ever could tell.”

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ Does Singer in person seem like the author whose stories and books you might be familiar with?
- ◆ How would you describe the different worlds in which the author lives?
- ◆ What sort of relationship does Singer have with his readers?
- ◆ How do you think Singer would react to the other films in this series?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Did Isaac Bashevis Singer ever feel “at home” in America?
- ◆ What do you sense is lost in the translation of his novels and stories from Yiddish to English?
- ◆ What is it about Singer’s sense of humor that seems distinctly Jewish?
- ◆ Is Singer an American writer? A Jewish writer?
- ◆ Singer said that “Jewishness has grades” – that a person can be a minimum Jew, a maximum Jew, or somewhere in between. Do you agree?
- ◆ How do you explain Singer’s appeal in the non-Jewish world?
- ◆ What question would you like to ask Singer?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING**Books and stories**

- ◆ Kresh, Paul. *The Magician of West 86th Street*. New York: Dial, 1979.
- ◆ Malin, Irving, editor. *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. New York: New York University Press, 1969.
- ◆ Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *Nobel Lecture*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1978.
- ◆ Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *The Collected Stories*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982.
- ◆ Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *In My Father's Court*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1978.
- ◆ Singer, Israel Joshua. *The Brothers Ashkenazi*. New York: Knopf, 1936.

Films

Yentl

Enemies: A Love Story

The Cafeteria