The Destruction and Resurrection of the Jews  
In the Fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer

The best-known utterance about the Holocaust in the writings of Isaac Bashevis Singer is the concluding statement of the English version of The Family Moskat: “Death is the Messiah. That’s the real truth.” The setting is Warsaw at the time of the Nazi bombardment and invasion in 1939; the speaker is Hertz Yanovar (a Jew who has substituted psychic research for religion). The statement gains its tremendous force less from the events within the novel than from the reader’s knowledge of what will befall the Jews after the novel ends, not only in Poland but everywhere in Europe. But it is also intended to pass adverse judgment upon the Jewish impatience for redemption, an impatience that expresses itself still to some extent in the religious longing of the traditional Jew but primarily in the developmental superstitions of the modern secular Jew. The novel shows how the Russian Revolution of 1905, which had accelerated the break-up of the Jewish world, had, paradoxically, quickened the messianic expectations both of the Chassidim who deplored this disintegration and of the maskilim (enlighteners) and leftists who welcomed it.

The Family Moskat is a study of the prospective victims of the Holocaust and of the reasons for their victimization. That Singer should, both in this novel and elsewhere, assume that the Holocaust is to be understood, insofar as it can be understood, primarily as an event in Jewish history, represents both an advantage and a shortcoming of his method. Singer never accepts the implications of the old joke told by liberals about the antisemite who claims that the Jews had caused World War I and gets the reply: Yes, the Jews and the bicyclists. Why the bicyclists? asks the antisemite. Why the Jews? asks the other. On the contrary, Singer sees the major catastrophes of Jewish history in the
Diaspora as so many announcements of the Holocaust, of which they are the prototypes. Nowhere in his fiction does Singer assume that the Jews were the accidental victims of the Holocaust, or that the disaster might just as well have befallen another people. When Reb Dan Katzenellenbogen ponders the relationship between the pacific ethos of the Jews and the orgiastic violence of the gentiles, and asks of the latter: "What were they seeking? What would be the outcome of their endless wars?" we know what the answer is: the destruction of the Jews. A Europe for which the prospect of murdering Jews had become, in the late nineteenth century, a primary principle of social unity, cannot be said to have stumbled accidentally upon the Jews as victims. But if Singer avoids the pitfalls of the approach which assumes the perfect innocence of the Jews and the accidental nature of their victimization, he may be said to go to the other extreme in that he tends to view the Nazis as only the latest in the long succession of those murderous outsiders who have obtruded themselves upon Jewish history again and again. "Yes," sighs the narrator of *Family Moskat*, "every generation had its Pharaohs and Hamans and Chmielnickis. Now it was Hitler."

In *The Slave*, a novel ostensibly dealing with the plight of Jews in seventeenth-century Poland in the aftermath of the fearful massacres perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people by the Polish peasant-revolutionary Chmielnicki, Singer is clearly writing about the Holocaust. Virtually all the questions that Singer’s explicit Holocaust literature characteristically asks are posed in this novel. "‘Why did this happen to us?’" one of the men asked. "‘Josefov was a home of Torah.’" "‘It was God’s will,’" a second answered. "‘But why? What sins did the small children commit? They were buried alive.’" How, the novel’s hero asks, can the mind grasp such a quantity of horrors? "There was a limit to what the human mind could accept. It was beyond the power of any man to contemplate all these atrocities and mourn them adequately.” What was the role of God in all this? Could so much evil really be explained as a test of man’s faith, of his free will? "Did the Creator require the assistance of Cossacks to reveal His nature?"
Could Chmielnicki really be a part of the godhead or was it perhaps true that this massacre of the Jews revealed the existence of a radical evil in the universe, a devil who had no celestial origins? *The Slave* also shows us Jews who are forced to dig their own graves before they are executed, berates the Jewish community for its shameful failure to offer forceful resistance to the murders, and preaches the sacred duty of remembering forever those who were slaughtered. “Through forgetfulness,” Jacob says of himself, “he had also been guilty of murder.” In its dwelling upon the physical obscenities of the mass murders, *The Slave* may even be said to deal more concretely with the Holocaust than those novels and stories that approach it frontally.

Our reaction to Singer’s tendency to generalize the Holocaust in this way will depend in part on whether we view antisemitism as a phenomenon deeply embedded in Western culture or as a movement quite distinct from religious Jew hatred, a movement that grew up only in the nineteenth century. Since a novelist ordinarily writes about what he knows, which in Singer’s case is the Jews and the Christians of Poland, we can hardly expect him to give us a portrayal of the German murderers of Polish Jewry. Yet we might reasonably expect that a writer who in treating the Holocaust recognizes the centrality of the question “Why the Jews?” should at least not preclude us from asking the question, although he cannot ask it himself, “Why the Germans?” That Singer should implicitly short-circuit this question is the more disturbing in view of the fact that he cannot finally convince us or himself that the Holocaust is no different in kind from the long series of disasters that have befallen the Jews since the seventeenth century. *The Slave* celebrates survival and recovery; the characters of *Enemies* who have survived the camps never recover and cannot return to life.

Singer is not only not discriminating in his treatment of the murderers of the Jews; he at times comes close to viewing them as merely a function of the Jews’ failure to be true to themselves and to their best traditions. The difficult and painful question of the Jews’ co-responsibility for the
disaster that was to engulf them is raised often in *The Family Moskat*, both by Jews and gentiles. At a political discussion early in the book, one of those overheated conspiratorial gatherings of Jews that Singer loves to recall, a man named Lapidus upbraids his leftist friends with this classic utterance: “We dance at everybody’s wedding but our own.” Leftist Jews, ready, even eager, to spill their ink and their blood lavishly for the liberation of every other oppressed group, have called into question the very existence of the Jews as a people. The Bialodrevna rabbi, for his part, charges that the enlightened Jews are “lead[ing] their own children to the slaughterhouse,” a remark that gains in impact from the later description, filled with Singer’s vegetarian zeal, of the actual slaughterhouse that Asa Heshel and Hadassah visit. A Polish inspector adds his sinister voice to this chorus of accusers when he tells Hertz Yanovar, who has been arrested (mistakenly) on charges of Communist activity, that the massive Jewish involvement in Bolshevism exacerbates antisemitism and “puts the very existence of the Jewish race in danger.”

If we suspect Singer of stacking the evidence against his left-leaning Jewish characters, we should remember that his accusation of self-destructive zealousness can be amply confirmed by external sources, and particularly by the testimony of two of the most astute Jewish leaders of the early part of this century. Chaim Weizmann said that hundreds of thousands of young Jews in early twentieth-century Russia were convinced revolutionaries “offering themselves for sacrifice as though seized by a fever.” Yitzchok Leibush Peretz wrote of the 1905 Revolution, which roused the hopes of so many leftist Jews, that the pogroms that accompanied it demonstrated a painful truth that the Jews would ignore at their peril: “In the hands of the Jew, the reddest of all flags has been placed forcibly and he has been told: ‘Go, go on and on, with all liberators, with all fighters for a better tomorrow, with all destroyers of Sodoms. But never may you rest with them. The earth will burn under your feet. Pay everywhere the bloodiest costs of
the process of liberation, but be unnamed in all emancipation proclamations, . . . You are the weakest and the least of the nations and you will be the last for redemption.”

Although it has been frequently and correctly observed, sometimes by Singer himself, that his literary roots lie outside the Yiddish tradition, although within the Jewish tradition, there is one important respect in which he is a continuator of Abramovitch, Sholom Aleichem, and Peretz. Like them, he looks upon the Jews, with a rare exception here and there (usually, in Singer, a Zionist exception), as political imbeciles, incapable of recognizing not just political actualities, but the most fundamental political and human necessity—that of self-preservation. It is therefore hardly surprising that the verdict of his fiction should go clearly against those Jews who undermined first their right to exist as a people and then, inevitably, their right to exist at all by embracing the Socialist distinction between the Jews as a people—a particularly reactionary and obscurantist people—and individual Jews who enlisted in the party of humanity. The running argument in Singer’s novels of modern life, over whether the hatred of Jews is increased by those Jews who retain their Yiddish and their caftan and their sidelocks or by those who assimilate themselves to the host culture by speaking Polish and shortening their jackets and their hair and their memory, was settled by history itself, for the plan to eliminate Jews from the face of the earth originated in a country where Jews aped the manners and the culture and often the religion of their prospective murderers. (To be sure, the German grandchildren, or at least great-grandchildren, of those Jews who had repudiated their faith would not have been among the murdered of Auschwitz; but they might have been among the murderers. “‘If we don’t want to become like the Nazis,’ ” says Herman Broder in Enemies, “‘we must be Jews.’ ”)

But this application of the wisdom of hindsight (which, we should add, is better than the stupidity of hindsight) is not the core of Singer’s analysis of the Jews’ core-sponsibility for the terrible fate that befell them. The hero
of *Enemies*, looking back upon the destruction of his people, believes that the Holocaust will have had one (and only one) salutary effect if it has discredited the delusion of progress: "Phrases like a ‘better world’ and a ‘brighter tomorrow’ seemed to him a blasphemy on the ashes of the tormented.” It was precisely the belief in progress, whether defined by Darwin or by Marx, that implicated Jewish *maskilim* and Jewish socialists in the deluge that eventually overwhelmed them and their brethren. First, it was this belief that sanctioned the elimination of biologically inferior species and socially backward classes; second, it intensified secular messianism and so prepared the arrival of the latest in the long line of false messiahs who have been a curse upon the history of the Jews.

In her brilliant essay on *The Manor*, Mary Ellmann has shown how pervasive is the influence of Darwinian evolutionism on that novel’s “emancipated” characters. According to her, Singer’s critique of Darwinism dwells upon its tendency to blur distinctions between man and animal, Jew and gentile, piety and impiety. My own view is that the main thrust of Singer’s attack is directed against the evolutionist belief in perpetual and progressive motion because, as historians have often argued, it is analogous to the Marxist belief in the infallibility of the historical process:

The conversation turned to religion. Zipkin said straight out that he was an atheist. . . . Man, as Darwin had proved, was descended from the apes. He was just another animal: *homo sapiens*. Zipkin began discussing the doctrines of Marx, Lassalle, and Lavrov. The Polish Jew, he said, had once had a real place in society. Before the liberation of the serfs, he had acted as an intermediary between the landowners and the peasantry. He had outlived his role and become little more than a parasite. He wasn’t productive, didn’t speak the language of the country in which he lived, and sent his children to cheders. How long was the Jew going to wash himself in ritual baths and walk around in *tzizis*?

Darwin’s Nature and Marx’s History, hypostatized, speak with one voice on the Jewish people: *they* are the chief impediment to the removal of inferior races and backward
classes that biology and history demand. When Ezriel Babad asks Zipkin whether all the Jews, including their own parents, must be destroyed because they are not peasants, his sister screams: "'Leave our parents and the Jews out of it. . . . A parasite is a parasite, even if he's your father.'"

In *The Estate*, which continues the story of *The Manor*, the most articulate exponent of the view that both history and nature use mankind merely as raw material for the fulfillment of their high purposes is Zadok, the wayward son of the Chassid Jochanan. Zadok believes the moral laws of the Jews are confuted by the laws of biology that sanction, and indeed require, the Malthusian struggle for existence and catastrophic wars. "'It's the same to nature who kills whom. For thousands of years bulls have been slaughtered and nature has kept quiet. . . . Why should a human life be so dear to Nature?'"

Zadok’s reference to the slaughter of bulls as a model for the slaughter of men serves to remind us that Singer’s vegetarianism, which he has called his only dogma, however embarrassing it may be to some of his admirers, is crucial to his understanding of the Holocaust. For Herman Broder, "what the Nazis had done to the Jews, man was doing to animals." Singer believes that acceptance in any form whatever of the theory that might makes right must eventually victimize the Jews. Hence, in the dreams of Yoineh Meir, the slaughterer who in the story of that name forsakes his calling because he comes to believe that injustice to dumb beasts retards messianic redemption, "cows assumed human shape, with beards and side locks, and skullcaps over their horns." Singer’s saints, like Jochanan, whose son will welcome the killing of bulls and of men, are not only troubled by the slaughter of animals but express tenderness over flies and bugs, as if they could feel that it was to be but a short step from the metaphorical depiction of Jews as parasites to their literal extermination as bugs.

But Darwinist-Marxist historicism is for Singer something more than just a modern expression of the doctrine
that might makes right. It inspires in him a special re-
vulsion because it joins to this doctrine the principle that
morality is a consideration not of the present but only of the
long run, and that the evil of the moment may be justified as
working the good of the developmental process. This
principle, too, is a modern version of what is for Singer an
ancient evil, which has spectacularly manifested itself in
Jewish history in the form of apocalyptic messianism. Satan in Goray is Singer’s most elaborate portrait of the

Satan in Goray is Singer’s most elaborate portrait of the
type of the false Messiah, or rather of the atmosphere from
which he is engendered. In this novel, and also in the story
of “The Destruction of Kreshev,” Singer shows that in the
messianic frenzy that existed during the lifetime of
Sabbatai Zevi in the seventeenth century and even long
after his apostasy and death, many Jews, convinced of the
Talmudic precept that the Messiah will come when one
generation is either wholly innocent or wholly guilty,
plausibly decided that the way to hasten redemption and
the coming of the Messiah was to plunge deeper and deeper
into evil and degradation. This seemed a shorter, less
winding path, than that of plodding virtue. In “Destruction
of Kreshev” Shloimele, a secret follower of the false
Messiah, goes so far as to say: “’I love fire! I love a
holocaust . . . I would like the whole world to burn and
Asmodeus to take over the rule.’ ” The moral of all such
stories of impatient attempts to hasten the coming of the
Messiah is enunciated by the old-fashioned narrator of the
last two chapters of Satan in Goray at the end of that book:
“LET NONE ATTEMPT TO FORCE THE LORD: TO END
OUR PAIN WITHIN THE WORLD: THE MESSIAH WILL
COME IN GOD’S OWN TIME. . . .”

When Singer moves to a modern setting, apocalyptic
messianism becomes historicist activism that expresses
itself through the by now familiar motto: “Worse is better.”
Precisely by exacerbating the evils, anomalies, and hatred
within the existing social system, one is preparing the
liberation from some mysterious region of the impulse that
will remove anomaly, injustice, and hatred altogether.
Ironically, however, it is now the religious characters or
those who retain nostalgic sympathy for the Jewish religion who become the exponents of patience and the critics of messianic urgency. In the nineteenth century, the Jews who altogether repudiate their religious faith adopt a secular faith, whereas it is Ezriel Babad, vacillating between the enlightenment of Western Europe and the obscurantism of Chassidism, who passes judgment on his sister’s belief in redemption, redemption through violent revolution: “She wanted to free the peasants and the proletariat. Like their father [the rabbi], she campaigned against the company of Satan. But what would come after victory? Not redemption, not saints who benefited from the splendor of the Divine glory, but lots of newspapers, magazines, theaters, cabarets. More railroads, more machines. . . .” Ezriel’s own daughter, Zina, becomes a kind of schlemiel-revolutionary who masquerades as a pregnant woman and experiences the birth pangs not of the Messiah but of a revolutionary arms smuggler whose cartridges burst from under her dress in a trolley car. Appalled by the results of all these secular attempts to realize the millennium, Ezriel resolves that even his own pacific ideal of cultural pluralism “could not be brought about forcibly, nor could the Messiah be compelled to arrive.” If Ezriel had survived to experience the Holocaust, he would, like his creator Singer, have viewed Hitler as a creation of Jewish as much as of German history. “The belief in false Messiahs,” Singer has said, “is very old and very young. What was Stalin if not a false Messiah? And what was Hitler if not a false Messiah?”

What Ezriel opposes to the future-oriented visions of the Darwinists and Marxists who wish to accelerate the movement of natural and social history is the wisdom of standing still or even moving in reverse that is embodied by the Chassidim. “When one gazes at the Talmudic scholars, one actually sees eternity. . . . How wonderfully they have isolated themselves amidst all this madness! They do not even know that they are at the end of the ‘Magnificent’ and bloody nineteenth century. In their Houses of Worship, it is always the beginning.” For Ezriel, the stationariness of the
Chassidim, their entire indifference to the messianic hopes of the Darwinians and revolutionists, their contempt for the alleged decrees of Nature and History that declare them parasitical and obsolete and reactionary, represent a splendid affirmation of human freedom and afford a glimpse of eternity itself.

For survivors of the Holocaust, however, the Chassidim are no longer distinctly available as a living embodiment of resistance to historical inevitabilities, or supposed inevitabilities. The characters in *Enemies*, many of them, live with the fear that the Holocaust really did show that the nineteenth-century ideologues who claimed that the voices of Nature and History were the voices of God were right after all. "‘Slaughtering Jews,’" says Masha, "‘is part of nature. Jews must be slaughtered—that’s what God wants.’" One can no longer see eternity in the Chassidim because they and eternity itself have been consumed by the Holocaust. "‘Everything has already happened,’ Herman thought. ‘The creation, the flood, Sodom, the giving of the Torah, the Hitler holocaust. Like the lean cows of Pharaoh’s dream, the present had swallowed eternity, leaving no trace.’" *Enemies* does not (like Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, for example) explore the possibility of recovery from the trauma for those Jews who have survived the Holocaust, but assumes that for the Jews generally the Holocaust was the end of the world. For Herman, the only future lies in the past, as it exists not in living anachronisms like the Chassidim but in what he calls "Jewish books." For Herman, and by implication thousands like him, there is no community or homeland to which to return. "These writings were home. On these pages dwelt his parents, his grandparents, all his ancestors."

But what of the homeland that did in fact arise after the death of European Jewry? To put the question another way, does Singer ever countenance a Jewish defiance of history that expresses itself as a living social reality rather than through nostalgia and literature? For many Jews, especially young people in the D.P. camps after the war, Zionism was precisely that spiritual impulse which alone could both
overcome the degradation and defy the absurdity of the Holocaust. Singer’s treatment of Zionism, although at a considerable remove from the center of his imaginative world, nevertheless conveys his sense of how far the Jews can resist the sentence of death that modern historical “laws” appear to have decreed for them by themselves taking action within history.

Singer’s most ambitious Holocaust novel, *The Family Moskat*, is also his most Zionist one. The book offers a series of parallel scenes intended to demonstrate that neither believers nor skeptics are capable of fathoming the enormity of Jewish suffering. When, at the outbreak of World War I, the Jews are expelled from Tereshpol Minor, Rabbi Dan Katzenellenbogen, as he guides the exodus of his people, is assailed with the all-expressive “*Nu*?” by the town freethinker and apostle of Western enlightenment, Jekuthiel the watchmaker:

“*Nu, rabbi*?” he said.  
It was clear that what he meant was: Where is your Lord of the Universe now? Where are His miracles? Where is your faith in Torah and prayer?  
“*Nu, Jekuthiel*,” the rabbi answered. What he was saying was: Where are your worldly remedies? Where is your trust in the gentiles? What have you accomplished by aping Esau?

To Jekuthiel it is inescapably clear that the Jewish God has been far less faithful to His people than they to Him; and to Rabbi Dan it is just as clear that if God cannot help the Jews, nothing can, for what salvation can come from imitating the ways of the oppressor? Both are right in what they deny, but unsupported in what they affirm. In either case, as Rabbi Dan says to himself: “The old riddle remained: the pure in heart suffered and the wicked flourished; the people chosen of God were still ground in the dust. . . .”

A similar parallelism aligns Rabbi Dan with his grandson Asa Heshel. Both labor during a lifetime over manuscripts grappling with the ultimate questions. The grandfather had produced three sackfuls of manuscripts, and “there had been a time when he had entertained the
idea of publishing some of his commentaries.” But a few days after the outbreak of World War I, “he crammed his manuscripts into the mouth of the stove and then watched them burn. ‘The world will survive without them,’ he remarked.” Asa Heshel, a few days after the outbreak of World War II, repeats Jekuthiel’s question, asking Barbara, “‘What do you think of God now, tell me.’” But he acknowledges the futility of his own hedonistic solution: “In the drawer of his desk lay an old version of ‘The Laboratory of Happiness,’ written in Switzerland. Asa Heshel unscrewed the door of the stove and thrust it inside.”

If the mystery of Jewish suffering cannot be fathomed by the intellectual efforts of either the believers or the skeptics, perhaps the best response would be an existential one, in which action would cut through the knot that intellect has not been able to untie. “Get thee out of thy country” is an injunction with deep roots in Jewish consciousness, and one that sounds in the ears of several characters in *The Family Moskat*, including Asa Heshel himself, who after his first brush with antisemitism in Warsaw says to himself: “‘Yes, Abram is right. I’ve got to get out of Poland. If not to Palestine, then to some other country where there’s no law against Jews going to college.’”

Since Abram Shapiro, who is something of a Chassid but more of a lecher, is the most prominent spokesman for Zionism among the novel’s major characters, the book can hardly be said to be a Zionist tract. Nevertheless, Zionism is distinctly set apart from socialism, communism, and other left-wing movements that arouse the wrath of the orthodox, for the very good reason that only Zionism grasped the dimensions of modern antisemitism and understood its implications for the future of the Jewish people.

Abram rails against the Jewish intellectuals who gain their university credentials by loudly proclaiming that Jews are a religion, not a nation, and that the backward, dirty Jews from the east pollute the Western European atmosphere. He insists that the Exile alone has made of the Jews the “‘cripples, schlemiels, lunatics’” who inhabit Warsaw: “‘Just let us be a nation in our own land and we’ll show what we can do. Ah, the geniuses’ll tumble out of their
mothers' bellies six at a time—like in Egypt.' ” Abram's claims for Zionism are expressed with the hyperbole that characterizes all his utterances. Yet he sees with lucidity what is concealed, by vanity or self-interest or even good will, from the eyes of the modernizing, worldly assimilationists, who (like Adele Landau) seek to become indistinguishable from the gentiles: “ 'And I suppose if we all put on Polish hats and twist our mustaches into points, then they'll love us,' Abram rejoined, and twisted at his own mustache. ‘Let the young lady read the newspapers here. They squeal that the modern Jew is worse than the caftaned kind. Who do you think the Jew-haters are aiming for? The modern Jew, that's who.’ ” All the subsequent events of the novel will bear out what Abram says.

Apart from the Orthodox Jews, the most active opponents of Zionism in the novel are the socialist and communist revolutionaries, whose devotion to "humanity" slackens only when the Jews come into view. The Family Moskat is the first major work by Singer in which the intensity of his dislike of leftist political movements makes itself felt. There can be no doubt but that Singer views socialism and communism as antithetical, first to the interests of the Jews, then to the interests of society, and ultimately to those of humanity itself. It is significant that Singer endows an anti-leftist character named Lapidus with some of the memorable utterances of the novel even though he appears in but a single scene and has no role whatever in the action. Lapidus disturbs the smug humanitarianism of the circle of Jewish leftists gathered at Gina Genendel's by pointing out that they weep bitter tears over every Ivan, every Slav, every oppressed nation of the world, except the Jews. He recounts an experience he had in Siberia that epitomized the self-deceptive masquerade of Jews who seek a secular substitute for the religion they have deserted: “ ‘ . . . I saw a bunch of Jews, with scrawny beards, black eyes—just like mine. At first I thought it was a minyan for prayers. But when I heard them babbling in Russian and spouting about the revolution—the S. R.’s, the S. D.’s, Plekhanov, Bogdanov, bombs, assassinations—I started to howl.’ ”

Lapidus lashes these Jews who, in strict accordance with
socialist doctrine, deny the existence of the Jews as a people. Some deep-seated impulse of treachery leads worldly Jews to deny only to the people from whom they have sprung those human rights that are indivisible from national rights. Bernard Lazare once wrote of emancipated French Jews: "It isn't enough for them to reject any solidarity with their foreign-born brethren; they have also to go charging them with all the evils which their own cowardice engenders... Like all emancipated Jews everywhere, they have also of their own volition broken all ties of solidarity." Lapidus, for his part, is, like Abram, a Zionist who sees no solution to the anomaly of Jewish existence in an increasingly antisemitic Europe except "'a corner of the world for our own.'"

Lapidus and Abram insistently ask the socialists why Jews should relinquish their nationality in order to assimilate with "humanity." In fact, they argue, if assimilation were successful, it would merge the Jewish people not with all humanity but only with the Polish people (or the German or the Hungarian), so that the division and strife of nations would continue just as before, but the People Israel would disappear from the earth. The Holocaust was to prove that assimilation was impossible in any case. For it was just as Hosea had long before predicted of the faithless of Israel: "She shall run after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them" (Hosea 2:9).

For the mature characters in The Family Moskat, Zionism is, as Theodor Herzl once said, "a return to the Jewish people even before it is a return to the Jewish homeland." It is not accidental that Asa's first Zionist utterances in the novel come on the occasion of his return from Switzerland to Tereshpol Minor. Upon entering the synagogue, Asa is overcome by "a heavy odor that seemed... to be compounded of candle wax, fast days, and eternity. He stood silent. Here in the dimness everything he had experienced in alien places seemed to be without meaning. Time had flown like an illusion. This was his true home, this was where he belonged. Here was where he would come for refuge when everything else failed." This joy in homecoming seems to depend on religion, yet when
Asa tries to explain his feelings to his grandfather, what he says is that Jews are a people like every other people, and are now "demanding that the nations of the world return the Holy Land to them." The conjunction of the two passages is striking. Very soon there will be no Tereshpol Minor synagogue in which to seek refuge and home when all else fails—as it does—and the Zionist contention that the Jews of Europe are building on sand will be borne out.

It remains for the generation of Asa's children and their friends to translate the desire for a return to the Jewish people into "practical" Zionism. Young Shosha Berman marries an authentic Zionist pioneer named Simon Bendel, who clearly represents the most vital element of the youngest generation of Polish Jews in the novel. Singer's desire to single out Zionism from among the myriad political movements that contend with each other for the loyalties of Polish Jews disaffected from traditional religion is evident in his treatment of Simon and his beleaguered group of Hebrew-speaking agriculturists: "Everyone was against them—the orthodox Jews, the Socialist Bundists, the Communists. But they were not the kind to be frightened off. If the Messiah had not come riding on his ass by now, then it was time to take one's destiny into one's own hands."

It is precisely this desire of Zionism to preempt the tasks reserved for Messiah that provokes the wrath of the orthodox: "'What's bothering you, rabbi? We are building a Jewish home.' " 'Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.' " This is not a debate, such as may be found in Satan in Goray, over the desirability of hastening the arrival of the Messiah by aggravating the evil situation of humanity so that deliverance will come to a generation steeped in degradation. Everybody, apart from the communists, recognizes that in a world dominated by Hitler, this would be a labor of supererogation. Rather, the Zionists take upon themselves the task reserved by religious tradition for the Messiah because they sense that modern antisemitism is not just another form of religious Jew-hatred but the instrument of a scheme to destroy the Jewish people forever.

The entire novel is animated by a tremendous pressure
toward some kind of apocalyptic resolution of the worsening condition of the Jews of Europe. Early in the book, before either of the World Wars has taken place, it seems to the orthodox that things cannot get worse than they are:

Speakers were thundering that Jews should not wait for Messiah to come, but build the Jewish homeland with their own hands. . . . The truth was that the Jews were being persecuted more and more. Day by day it became harder to earn a living. What would be the end of it all? There was only one hope left—for Messiah to come, to come quickly while there were still a few pious Jews left.

During World War I it seems even more certain to the orthodox that the cup must at last be full. What can be the meaning of the endless suffering of the Jews but that redemption is at hand? “ ‘Enough! It is time! High time for the Messiah!’ ” Even the fabric of daily life is interwoven with messianic expectation, so that Adele’s delivery pains provoke the remark “Everything is attended by suffering . . . birth . . . Messiah. . . . ” With the approach of Hitler, even many of the pious go off to Palestine, complaining about their elders and their God: “ ‘The old generation knows only one thing: Messiah will come. God knows, he’s taking his time.’ ”

The culminating event of the novel would seem to be precisely the occasion on which Singer, if he wished, could demonstrate the convergence of catastrophe with redemption, Holocaust with rebirth in the homeland. It is the last Passover to be celebrated by the Jews of Warsaw before they and their civilization are buried in universal darkness. The celebration looks backward to the great holiday occasions earlier in the novel, when the spiritually dispersed members of what had formerly been the community of Israel are briefly united with their people and with their best selves; and it also looks forward to the yawning emptiness of the Jewish future in Europe. So insistent is Singer on the irresistibility of Jewish fate that for this Passover celebration he goes to the trouble of recalling, from Palestine as well as America, those characters who have already emigrated, despite the fact that all the Jews still resident in Poland “were possessed of the same thought: to be helped to get out of Poland while there was still time.”
The Passover, described in great, loving detail by Singer, is the novel's most beautiful and most terrible occasion. Not only does it summon up and reenforce the memory of past holidays; it is a holiday on which the original redemption of the Jews from bondage and deliverance to their promised land is commemorated and the hope of their imminent salvation and return to the ancestral homeland is more immediate than at any other time of the year. In a voice broken with weeping, Pinnie Moskat recites: "'And it is this same promise which has been the support of our ancestors and of us, for in every generation our enemies have arisen to annihilate us, but the Most Holy, blessed be He, has delivered us out of their hands. . . . '" From the point of view of Jewish religion, Hitler is only the latest repetition of the Amaleks who have plagued the Jews throughout their existence. Yet many at the seder table wonder to themselves: "Would a miracle happen this time too? In a year from now would Jews be able again to sit down and observe the Passover? Or, God forbid, would the new Haman finish them off?"

The Passover service traditionally concludes with the exclamation "Next Year in Jerusalem!" If Singer wished to see in the qualified triumph of Zionism a kind of redemption for which the Holocaust had been a horrible price, or in the State of Israel a realization of the messianic expectations of so many of his Holocaust victims, here exactly would be the point for him to reveal his conviction. But he does nothing of the kind. Instead, he pointedly omits any mention of "Next Year in Jerusalem!" in his description of the seder and concludes with Pinnie's question: "'These unleavened cakes, why do we eat them?' " Even though the novel treats Zionism sympathetically, and in this very chapter we are told that Asa's son David is observing the holiday in Palestine with his fellow pioneers, Singer will not endorse historicist views of the Holocaust as the labor pains of national rebirth or religious views of it as the price of redemption. Rather, he wants above all to convey the sense that for the Jews of Europe the end was at hand, and in a more absolute sense than any that could have been conceived by either orthodox or nationalist Jews. When Abram the Zionist tries to console the gloomy Asa by
remarking that "'the end of the world hasn't come yet,'" Asa replies that "'the end of our world has come.'" The final scene of the English version of the novel allows no hint of apocalypse in this disaster, no glimpse of a redemption beyond the catastrophe.

In the deepest sense, then, the Zionists of The Family Moskat who flee to Palestine are as homeless, as desperate for refuge, as Herman Broder of Enemies in the United States. For Singer, the ultimate refuge is in the instruments of Jewish spirituality. For him, "the two thousand years of exile have not been a dark passage into nowhere but a grand experiment in upholding a people only on spiritual values. Even though we have attained the land we longed for . . . this experiment is far from being concluded." At the end of The Manor, Calman Jacoby finds a refuge from the acrid dissolvents of Polish Jewry not in the land but in the spirit of his ancestors, as embodied in his shelves of sacred books that reunite him with past generations. "The Hebrew letters were steeped in holiness, in eternity. They seemed to unite him with the patriarchs, with Joshua, Gamaliel, Eliezer, and with Hillel the Ancient. . . . Among these shelves of sacred books, Calman felt protected." Calman understands, though he cannot conceptualize, the truth that all those secularizing and reformist movements within the Jewish community that sought to confer upon the Jews emancipation and human rights had in fact deprived them of their freedom and their humanity. To be human was to stand where one's ancestors had stood, rooted in the language and laws and customs that were a permanent affront to evolutionism and progressivism.

For the survivors of the Holocaust, Jewish books become not only the means of remaining human by returning into the buried life of one's ancestors; they become the instrument for the resurrection of the dead. As another character, Herman Gombiner in the story called "The Letter Writer," says: "The spirit cannot be burned, gassed, hanged, shot. Six million souls must exist somewhere." Gombiner, during an illness, goes in search of his lost relatives, and his quest leads him, via Canal Street in New
York City, into an underworld charnel-house, where he meets a gravedigger tending the bones. "'How,'" asks Herman, "'can anyone live here?'" "'Who would want such a livelihood?'" The answer, of course, is that this is where Singer has chosen to live.

We can see this very clearly in one of his supernatural tales called "The Last Demon." Of the many stories in which Singer uses a first-person narrator who bears marked resemblances to the author, none comes so close to representing the author's inner relationship to his own work as this one. The narrator of the tale tells of his plight as the last remaining demon, whose occupation is gone because man himself has become a demon: to proselytize for evil in these times would be carrying coals to Newcastle. Like Singer himself, the last demon has been deprived of his subject, the Jews of Eastern Europe. "I've seen it all," he says, "the destruction of Tishevitz, the destruction of Poland. There are no more Jews, no more demons. . . . The community was slaughtered, the holy books burned, the cemetery desecrated." Like Singer, the last demon attempts to speak as if history had not destroyed his subject and as if he could defy time: "I speak in the present tense as for me time stands still." Like Singer, the last demon knows, or thinks he knows, that there is no judge and no judgment, and that to the generation that has indeed succeeded in becoming wholly guilty the only Messiah that will come is death: "The generation is already guilty seven times over, but Messiah does not come. To whom should he come? Messiah did not come for the Jews, so the Jews went to Messiah." Like Singer, finally, the demon must sustain himself on dust and ashes and Yiddish books. "I found a Yiddish storybook between two broken barrels in the house which once belonged to Velvel the Barrelmaker. I sit there, the last of the demons. I eat dust. . . . The style of the book is. . . . Sabbath pudding cooked in pig's fat: blasphemy rolled in piety. The moral of the book is: neither judge, nor judgment. But nevertheless the letters are Jewish. . . . I suck on the letters and feed myself. . . . Yes, as long as a single volume remains, I have something to sustain me."
The attempt to resurrect the shattered remnant of Jewish life in Israel, one of the most extraordinary instances of national rebirth in history, one of the outstanding examples of Jewish defiance of history, ultimately plays but a minor part in the great body of Singer’s fiction. Rather, he chooses to make of literature itself the instrument for preserving the memory, and resurrecting the souls, of the dead. The literature upon which this massive responsibility devolves is no longer a sacred one, nor is it written in Hebrew, the traditional sacred tongue but also a language that, in Singer’s view, is now “becoming more and more worldly.”

Yet, through an ironic reversal of the traditional relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish, the language of the majority of the victims of the Holocaust becomes for Singer the loshen khoydesh, the holy tongue of the Jewish people. “The deader the language,” Singer has said, “the more alive is the ghost. Ghosts love Yiddish, and, as far as I know, they all speak it. . . . I not only believe in ghosts but also in resurrection. I am sure that millions of Yiddish-speaking corpses will rise from their graves one day, and their first question will be: Is there any new book in Yiddish read? For them Yiddish will not be dead.” And, we are implicitly invited to add, because of Yiddish they will not be dead. In his literary character, which is to say in his subject and language, Singer has made himself into a splendid anachronism whose flourishing existence defies the death-sentence imposed upon the Jewish people in the nineteenth century and nearly carried out in the twentieth.


7. Irving Saposnik, in a vigorous and intelligent (although, in my view, ultimately mistaken) article entitled “Translating The Family Moskat,” *Yiddish* 1 (Fall 1973): 26–37, has compared the differing implications of the English and Yiddish endings of the novel. He attaches great importance to the fact that the closing pages of the original, Yiddish version depict a group of Zionists escaping from Warsaw.


9. Ibid.
The twentieth-century ruins of that world to which so many Jews gave their admiration and devotion between, say, 1789 and 1933 (the date of Hitler's coming to power), has grown sick of the ideals Israel asks it to respect. These ideals were knocked to the ground by Fascist Italy, by Russia, and by Germany. The Holocaust may even be seen as a deliberate lesson or project in philosophical redefinition: "You religious and enlightened people, you Christians, Jews, and Humanists, you believers in freedom, dignity, and enlightenment—you think that you know what a human being is. We will show you what he is, and what you are. Look at our camps and crematoria and see if you can bring your hearts to care about these millions." And it is obvious that the humanistic civilized moral imagination is inadequate. Confronted with such a "metaphysical" demonstration, it despairs and declines from despair into lethargy and sleep.—Saul Bellow, To Jerusalem and Back (1976)