

REALTIME FILE
YBC
GREAT JEWISH BOOKS BOOK CLUB VIDEO CONFERENCE WITH PROF. ANITA
NORICH
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Post-production editing by Jessica Parker

JESSICA PARKER: So it is now 8 o'clock. So let's get going. Hi everyone and welcome to our first video conference of the 2018 Book Club. Thank you for your careful reading, your thoughtful comments and your insightful perceptions in our Facebook group and via email. I'm so glad that you are all joining us this evening. And we have our largest group to date with 50 participants. I'm Jessica Parker. I'm sure many of you know who I am, the coordinator for the Great Jewish Books Book Club. In just a moment I'm going to introduce our featured guest Prof. Anita Norich, but first I want to tell you about the structure of this evening.

All participants will be muted to prevent excessive background noise. Prof. Norich will start with about a 15-minute introduction and then we will open it up to questions for about 45 minutes. You can ask her questions by typing in the chat box. Prof. Norich will be repeating questions for the members watching the video recording after the fact and won't have access to the chat box. In addition, for the first time ever we are offering live captioning for this video conference. If you would like to see the closed captions, please click on the "CC" icon at the bottom of your resume window. To turn them off click on the "CC" icon again. And if you use the closed captioning I'm keen to receive your feedback afterwards so please do call or email me to let me know about your experience. And those instructions are also at the very top of the chat feed if you scroll up to see that.

And if you are having a technical difficulty or issue this evening please send a private chat message to me at Jessica Parker, you can send private one through the chat box, email me at bookclub@yiddishbookcenter.org, the usual email address, or call me at 413-256-4900 extension 131. And I can take calls during the webinar because I will be muting myself. And so, without further ado I'd like to introduce Prof. Anita Norich. Prof. Norich is the Tikva Frymer-Kensky Collegiate Professor of English and Judaic Studies

at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Writing in Tongues: Yiddish Translation in the 20th Century*, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish-American Literature in America During the Holocaust*, *The Homeless Imagination in the Fiction of Israel Joshua Singer*, the author we are clearly here to discuss tonight, translator of Kadya Molodovsky's *Fun Lublin biz Nyu York*, which is forthcoming and other volumes including *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, *Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Context and Intertext*, and *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literatures*. She translates Yiddish literature and teaches, lectures and publishes on a range of topics concerning modern Jewish cultures, Yiddish language and literature, Jewish-American literature and Holocaust literature and we are very lucky to have her with us tonight. So, thank you very much and without further ado, Prof. Anita Norich.

ANITA NORICH: Thank you, Jessica and thank you everyone. Can everyone hear me? just nod. Thank you I've never done a webinar before so I will be practicing technology as we talk about this text. And I just wanted to give an introduction to it for a few minutes. I'm sure everyone has lots of questions. It's a very very full book. One of the questions that I had about this book is why Lodz? That is, why the city in which IJ Singer actually never lived? Singer lived in Warsaw for his time in Poland and came to New York in 1935. For the second time. The first time was occasioned by the theater production of his earlier novel *Yoshe Kalb*. This novel, *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, came out, as did most of Yiddish literature, in serial form between 1933 and 1935. And as Rebecca Goldstein points out in the introduction to the volume that you have it was an almost immediate bestseller in English when it was translated.

The why Lodz question: you'll remember we are tracing Lodz and *The Brothers Ashkenazi* for about a century from just after the Napoleonic Wars as Jews are moving more and more into Lodz, through the German occupation of Lodz, to post-Russian Revolution and the reestablishment of Poland which as you know was not a sovereign nation between the Napoleonic Wars and the end of the First World War. Lodz was known as the Manchester of England, and I think that accounts mostly for his use of Lodz. That is, Singer was interested in looking at what industrialization has done, and what changes it may or may not have brought for the Jews of Eastern Europe and Lodz as an industrial city is really, as you saw in much of this, is really kind of the poster child for Marxist and socialist ideas. The urge for the workers unity, for unions, from each according to his means, etc., etc. But what I think is crucial here is not just the period of time that he covers in this century, but when this work was written and published.

Hitler had already come to power. Pilsudski, head of Poland, was in a pact with Hitler from 1934 on, the anti-Semitism in Poland was unavoidable, unmistakable. And some of the, most of the despair and the tensions that you see in this book emerge from that.

The Brothers Ashkenazi was also put on stage by Maurice Schwartz, and I just want to show you two pictures from that public, from that production, that will give you some idea of what an American audience was seeing in the 1930s.

So, this is a picture of Maurice Schwartz cutting off his *payes* as Max Ashkenazi, and here is one of both Brothers Ashkenazi, just to give you an idea of the traditional clothing. There are other pictures showing them with what is called German style, that is short coats, and no yarmulkes, no *payes*. Nothing.

There is a really clear distinction between the way in which English readers read this text and the way that Yiddish readers read it. If you read the Yiddish criticism about the *Di brider Ashkenazi* what you hear most of the critics saying is how modern, how modernist the novel is, how psychologically astute it is, how carefully he developed the psyche of both of these characters. If you read the English critics, who are writing at the same time, you get comments that say there's no psychological depth in this work, so exactly the opposite of what the Yiddish critics are saying. And obviously this points to the different audiences who read this, who were interested in Yiddish literature, either in Yiddish or in translation and the different contexts in which they find themselves.

But it also points to, I think, something that is often overlooked in Singer's, in criticism of Singer, which is not that these two kinds of critics, the English and the Yiddish, are reading different texts, but rather that Singer is not interested in what we, who have a psychological language, would call the self. He is not interested in the psyche of "the self" in the way that we are, quite often. Rather, he sees the individual as a kind, as a social construct. And he's interested in the individual as a... what should I say? As a model for the Jewish people, that is, as an exemplar of the Jewish people. He's interested in history, he's interested in the broad canvas rather than in the psyche of the individual.

There's, this novel, like most of his writing, is divided into three parts. And in that tripartite division, the structure of the novel reproduces what is clear throughout the novel. That is, the novel is built on a series of tensions between oppositions that can't come to a synthesis. We have Max and Jacob, we have Max and Lodz, and the city as a whole, we have Max and Nissan, we have Nissan's Marxism and his father's holy studies, as Singer calls them, we have Hasidim and assimilators, workers and manufacturers, these are all in opposition to one another, and there is no synthesis possible in this, in these oppositions, and I think that also is part of Singer's response to the prevalence of Marxist thought in his age. That is, Marxist thought that depends on some fundamental level on a thesis and antithesis and then a synthesis is exactly what he is rejecting here. It's not that one of these characters is a thesis and the other one and antithesis, although they are often quite opposite, what really matters is that no synthesis is possible here. And synthesis implies a kind of movement that he is no longer, if he ever did, he is no longer believing in.

Singer's main theme, I think, here and through most of his work, is the delusion of those who believe in any kind of messianic thought. Whether that is the *mashiakh*, the religious *mashiakh*, or the messianism of Marx. All of those are things he sees as delusion and he sees delusion as...deadly. Sometimes quite literally.

One of the ways that I think about this that helps me kind of visualize it is that if you think of his depiction, his creation, his sense of world history, if you think of it as a movie, a movie goes forward. You're not really supposed to reel it back and see it again, there's a kind of linear development of a movie. And that is his view of history.

But Jewish history he sees as a kind of endless loop. That is, it's cyclical. It simply repeats itself over and over no matter who is in charge, who the government is...who is controlling the Jewish people. That is, progress of some sort is possible for the world, but, and again remember when this is written, the Jews in this novel will always occupy the same place no matter where we are historically. He gives in this novel a new meaning to what we mean when we say, "from dust to dust." That is, Lodz is literally built on sand. That is a refrain through this novel. Lodz is built on sand. The sands are shifting but they are unalterable. You cannot change the nature of sand and that's how he sees not just Lodz but Jewish history and the fate of these two characters. The main images that we have of Lodz is the sand and paper. That it is worthless paper. Not grounded, even though we are in the industrial, in the industrial age.

One of the real questions I think by the end of the novel is, there are various places in the last couple of chapters where Max tells us or the narrator tells us that Max has found God, that he finds in Ecclesiastes and in the Book of Job, meaning that he had rejected earlier, and that in fact he has come back to the religious ways of his father. But I think we have to take that with a little grain or maybe a big grain of salt. Because the other thing that happens at the end is that he becomes a Zionist on day three of sitting shiva for his brother. He decides to work the land, then he decides I will not work the land, I am going to be an industrialist in the Holy Land, because that is what the Holy Land will need and I'm not equipped to work the land and then a day later he decides to stay put. What is the point of going this far. And to reopen the factories. So, whether there's been a real transition or real moment of understanding and growth in Max is less significant to Singer I think than the broader question of the social and historical situation of the Jews.

I wanted to point to one aspect of this that may be troubling to some, or that was certainly troubling at the time of its publication, and that has to do with Singer's depiction of sexuality. And there, too, we have a series of contrasts. Jacob has this healthy sexuality, this healthy bodily image. Max is of course is weak and unable... well, I will not say unable... Jacob's first wife is described as being sickly and virginal. His father does not have what we would call a happy or healthy sex life. Dina is disgusted with Max when she first marries him. We have men crawling out of bed. We have young girls being raped. We have homosexuality, for Singer, as an image of...perversion. And he does this even more in *The Family Carnovsky*, the novel that follows this, where depicting homosexuality as perverse and ugly is a way of containing the, for him I think, the threat of the Nazis. Right, if you can make them "other," if you can make them perverse, you can somehow contain them and dismiss them as, or dismiss them as being wrong and ugly.

It is probably worth noting at some point, and this may as well be the point, that his brother Isaac Bashevis Singer claimed IJ Singer as the first modern writer of Yiddish and the claim for him was based on the fact that Singer, and now I am quoting something that he actually said, that IB Singer said to me many many years ago, which is that IJ Singer introduced sex to the Yiddish novel. This is not true but it's a dramatic kind of way of saying that there was something new there.

One of the questions, and I will end with this, that the novel leaves I think unanswered is the end for Jacob and the end for Max. That is, Max says that Jacob has chosen the Gentile way. That is, that he has opted for honor and for resisting those who would oppress him. And Max's position is no, we need to appease the wild beast. That is the language of the English translation. We need to live on and not follow the ways of the Gentiles. Not physical force, but reason, education. And I think Singer leaves that open. He shows two paths but he does not follow one to its conclusion.

Okay. I see I'm getting some...some questions. Jessica may I take them now? I'm getting them privately. Yes, I guess that's right. Okay.

JESSICA PARKER: Please do. Please go ahead. Thank you.

ANITA NORICH: Okay, here is one question: "I read parts of the 1946 translation and it was like hearing the same events described by a different observer. What role did the quality or depth of the translations play in critical responses of reviewers reading in different languages? Did Singer have any control over the translation? Was there a bias as opposed to a skill level issue in the original translation?"

I think, you know, this has been my, not quite my life's work, but a huge chunk of my life's work. Translation is always an act of interpretation. And what we have here are two different interpretations of the same text geared for a different audience. So, Singer by 1936 would not have had enough English to do the translation and Maurice Samuel who did the first translation was a well-respected and very good translator. The second translation was done by Joseph Singer, but after IJ Singer's death. Joseph Singer was of course his son. And I think you know, you can have different preferences for different translations. I like this Joseph Singer translation. But that's a matter of taste as much as anything else.

Another question: "One of the things that struck me in what you say about IJ Singer's depiction about homosexuality resonated because Bashevis seems to have a far more sensitive view of homosexual relationships in his fiction. Do you think there's a reason for this?"

I'm sure there's a reason. I'm sure I don't know what it is. Except that it is taking place at a different time. I'm not even sure that I would say Bashevis has a more sensitive view. I think Bashevis uses the notion of homosexuality for different purposes than does IJ Singer. IJ Singer is trying to find something that can help him understand and dismiss the Germans, namely the Nazis. Bashevis is interested in a way that IJ is not in

transgression. He finds transgression of any kind, cross-dressing, you know I'm not going to sing parts of *Yentl* for you, but you get the idea. Cross-dressing, lesbian, homosexual, a man with three women in three different parts of the city... those are the kinds of things that interest him because he wants, Bashevis that is, wants to push the boundaries of identity that he, I think, finds too confusing.

Oh great. Okay. "Can you comment on the banning of the novel in Poland in the late '30s with the current political situation in Poland?"

The situation in Poland... is horrible. I mean what can I say? I think that the '30s and now are not identical, but they are less dissimilar than any of us would like. I think that's a fair statement to make.

Here's a question: "I'm asking this on behalf of someone who couldn't participate. The book was published serially, did Singer write it gradually as it was published chapter by chapter? This may explain the big jumps in time if he perhaps did not plan it out that well. As brilliant as it is, I wonder about the lack of development of Jacob Bunem and the jumps in time."

It's an excellent question. All these are really good questions. Everything in Yiddish literature was published serially. And this was no doubt written as it was being published. There is a wonderful exchange, not about this novel, but about *The Family Carnovsky*, the next novel. A wonderful exchange between him and Abe Cahan, the editor of *The Forverts*, in which Singer outlines what he's going to do with the ending of that novel and Cahan writes back and says, "No, that's too sensational, that's junky, that's trashy. Do it this way." This was the way that Cahan often worked. And Singer wrote back and said, you know, basically he said, "I'm the writer, you stick to editing, don't tell me how to write." So, there was always this kind of back-and-forth about developments of the novels as they were being serially published.

It may explain, as you say, the big jumps in time... and as I'm sure you all notice, this is not an equivalence between Max and Jacob, that is, not in terms of the volume, how much is written about each. And that may be because of the serialization but I think it's actually because he's not so much again interested in these individuals. He's interested in the conflict and the tension more between Max and Lodz than between Max and Jacob.

"What was IJ's opinion of America and capitalism?"

Not high. He was not...he was not a socialist. He was not a communist. If he even believed in politics at all. He saw America as obviously a refuge in the '30s, and that didn't take much imagination to see it in that way. But he also deplored the state of Yiddish in America when he got here. That is, there seemed to be less interest in it than he had hoped. Abe Cahan had a much stronger hand than he had hoped. He had been very happy when he came in '32 for the production of his earlier novel *Yoshe Kalb* which was the great success of the Yiddish theater season in that year and so he really

thought he was entering into a world that had opened for him, and both because of history, because of the timing in which he came, and because of the decline of Yiddish that he saw, and the decline of quality of Yiddish that he saw, he was less than enamored.

“Can you address the biblical references?”

I'm not sure I understand that question. So perhaps you can follow up on that. This is absolutely typical of Yiddish literature, that is biblical references don't signify a religious adherence. They signify the education that these mostly men and male writers had. He was steeped, IJ was steeped in religious texts. He rebelled from them, but they were part of his imaginative makeup.

Whoops. “One question that we debated was the way women were depicted in the novel. Particularly the nameless Mrs. Ashkenazi. Do you think this is an oversight or deliberately... particularly as she has a name in the play?”

Look, the depiction of women in Singer's novels are less than happy-making. His women, for him female characters are instrumental. They show either the perversions of the men, or they show the limitations of Jewish life. He is again, not interested, not just in the psychology of women, he's just not interested in them as characters or he does not depict them particularly well as characters. Even in the short stories, there are a couple that focus on women, but women are just not...present in a meaningful way.

“Would you agree that the book foreshadows the Shoah based on Singer's appreciation or acceptance of the cyclical history of the Jews?”

I don't think anything foreshadows *khurbn*, anything foreshadows the Shoah. And one of my, I don't think anyone, not Singer, not Kafka, not anyone could have foreseen or seen the cyclical nature of Jewish history as leading to *khurbn*, as leading to the Holocaust. This is how Yiddish literature is often read and one of my interests is in trying to read it, not as post-Holocaust, but as pre-Holocaust, which is indeed what it was.

One of the things to keep in mind about cyclical history is that even if you, if you believe in cyclical history and you come upon, it is hard to imagine this, and you come upon, and the Holocaust happens, you are not aware of it as it is happening because in the cyclical nature of Jewish history, the Jews have overcome previous horrors. There's no lack of them. So, when the Germans, when the Nazis come into Poland, it is worse. It's really, really bad. But there is, until very late, a belief that this too will be overcome. And now in hindsight we have the wisdom to say...shouldn't they have known? But, of course, they couldn't have known.

Ah. So, the question about the Bible is references to twin brothers and also the significance of the ending. Actually, that's an interesting point too. Of course, there are twins in the Bible, Jacob and Esau. One of the things that has always fascinated me is, when there are two siblings, twins or not, the story is mostly about the younger one.

That is, the younger one needs more protection, more help, more attention and maybe Singer is following that kind of biblical logic.

“What did Singer give to Yiddish literature or bring that was new to Yiddish literature? And for those who have not read any other work of IJ's what would you recommend next?”

Let me answer the second one first. *Yoshe Kalb*. It was translated once as *The Sinner*, so read *Yoshe Kalb*. What did Singer give to Yiddish literature? Singer was part of a number of groups, literary groups that were important to Yiddish literature. One of the ones that he belonged to, and you can tell how important these are just by the names, or you can tell their interest just by the names. One of the groups that he belonged to, the major group that he belonged to in Warsaw, was a group called *Di khaliastre*, “the gang,” and like every other Yiddish literary movement of the 20th century, they declared themselves as new, as having no predecessors. We have *Di yunge* in America, we have *Inzikhistn*, the “introspectivists,” we had *Yung vilne*, we have a series of groupings in various geographical locations that declare that they are bringing something that has never been seen before. As I said, Bashevis thinks he brings in sex. He is not the only one. And it is not unique to him and he's not the first. But he does and there are others here as well, he does have this broad panoramic historical vision that he brings into most, into all of his works. There are two in particular that I would recommend as I said, *Yoshe Kalb* because it focuses so much more on the individual and on the kinds of split identities that the individual has. The other one that is often cited, I think, appropriately is *The Family Carnovsky*. The last novel that he wrote.

“Were Singer's very negative representations of Hasids common among other Yiddish writers at the time?”

Absolutely. This is one thing we just need to accept about Yiddish literature. It is the secular literature and it sees Hasidic rebbes and Hasidic enthusiasm and Hasidic ways as being fundamentally irrational and therefore potentially dangerous. It is not the only view of Hasidim that we have.

Here, so I might mention here Singer's own background. His father was a Hasid. And his father was an incredibly...what shall we say? Ineffectual man. That is, he couldn't make a living. He didn't understand money. He left his family to go to the rebbes. He used his daughter's dowry money to publish his own books. He's described by, there are three Singer writers, I mean, there is IB Singer, there's IJ Singer, and there's a sister, Esther Kreitman. And all three of them use the same word to describe their father. They don't call him a Hasid, they call him a “*batlen*,” that is someone who's ineffectual, inefficient, and doesn't have a clue about how to function in the world. His mother, on the other hand, also came from a long and very distinguished rabbinic line, but she was a *misnagid*, that is, her family belonged to the opponents of the Hasidim, who thought that the Hasidic ways were not paying enough attention to learning, and were worshipping, in their view, a particular rebbe and who sought to distance

themselves from that. So, he really comes from this mixed marriage. I don't know what else to call it. Between Hasidic and *misnagdic*.

“What would IJ Singer comment on the status of Jews in Europe today and in the US?”

I don't know. I mean, I don't know how to predict. I think this is really a question about how we would comment on the status of Jews in Europe and the US today.

“Do you think we were supposed to see Huntze as a sympathetic character, as one of the few genuinely authentic characters, whose home was twice occupied with neither subsequent residents really belonging or having built it themselves, and he seemed to be one of the few most comfortable in his original skin, yet he was also a Gentile and pointedly coarse?”

I don't see...if we were discussing this we could have a discussion about it. But since you're asking my opinion, I don't see any of these characters as particularly sympathetic. And the coarseness of that character I think overpowers whatever sympathetic feelings we might have to him.

“In contemporary reviews of the serial, of the serialization, the play the translation, did reviewers point to any lessons to be learned from the story? Did these lessons change over time?”

Another great question. Yes. Yes to both of those questions. As I said, the lessons that they learned from the story depended on the time in which those lessons were being read and the language in which they were being read. To some, obviously the lesson of *The Brothers Ashkenazi* was that the world is out to get us and we better do something to fix it. Which means, emigration or socialist activity, whatever...whatever was the political leaning of the reader already.

It's also probably worth noting, as I'm sure many of you know, that at the time of publication there were not only four Yiddish dailies in New York, all of whom, this was published in the *Forverts*, all of whom reviewed everything that was being published in the other ones, but also scores, dozens and dozens and dozens of publications of journals and literary journals that all reviewed books, and it's almost impossible to find a review in any of these that didn't go along with the political leanings of the journal. So, for example the *Forverts* was a socialist, largely socialist newspaper. The *Morgn-frayhayt* was a communist newspaper and they didn't like this because he rejected communism, he rejected the promises of Marx. The *Tog*, the *Morgen zshurnal*, was a more religious one, a more conservative one, and so they went along, the reviewers went along with the politics of the papers in which they were writing.

“The character who struck me most in the novel was Nissan who I would argue is the only character who was somewhat sympathetic. Do you believe that Nissan represents a rejection of Haskalah as much as of communism?”

It's an interesting question. I guess so. I guess I would say so. That is, it is true that Nissan is a sympathetic character. And he's also like every other character in this book, deluded and he only comes to his senses very, very late, if at all. So, what he is saying at first is a rejection of the promise of the Enlightenment. You know, be like everybody else and they will be good to you. What he's interested in is class differences. Not Jewish-Gentile differences. But class differences and he is disillusioned by communism for obvious reasons.

"To follow up on the Huntz question, the depiction of Jewish-German relations were more favorable than Polish-Jewish relations."

Yeah. That is also fairly typical until the end of the war and after, and remember... they were living among Polish, among Poles, so that the people who they felt most betrayed by were their neighbors, not these marauding armies that came in. Although, the sympathy to Germans ends very quickly. And again, for obvious reasons.

Here's an interesting question. "Did IJ Singer like anyone in real life?" I understand why you ask that question. "Did he write other novels with sympathetic characters? These characters work well as types for the historical panorama, but they are not likable."

I think he liked his wife. I think he liked his children. One of whom died just before they came to America. He liked his brother. He was not a jolly guy. But again, look where we are, when we are. I think that says a lot about his take on the world.

"It seems odd in a book that's part of our expedition into the rich world of Yiddish culture that none of the main characters in this work have much use or interest in furthering or exploring literature or the arts. Indeed, they seem to react negatively to their Jewish cultural heritage either by reacting to it or by ignoring it. Was this a characteristic he intended to show? In other words, did he seem to imply that it is dangerous for Jews to ignore Jewish cultures as they respond to their environment?"

That's a very difficult question as well. I don't think that his lesson is to, is the dangers of exploring Jewish culture. I think his lesson is the dangers of ignoring Jewish history. Or of being deluded about Jewish history or about the Jewish future. Again, the messianic theme. It's not unusual to find main characters in works of many languages who are not particularly interested in the arts. We may like them to be, but it doesn't always happen.

Did... there was a question. Ah. Thank you for this one. "Could you say something about how the three Singer siblings may have influenced each other's writing and writing lives?"

I've spent a lot of time on this question, I have to say. So, here's the short version of the answer. IB Singer attributed his interest in writing and his ability to pursue writing to his brother. He worshipped his brother. Although, IJ died in 1944 at the age of 50, quite suddenly of a heart attack in his apartment. And really only afterwards did IB Singer go back to writing fiction. He had been writing essays for the *Forverts* and other publications since coming to the US. He publishes, I'm on IB now, he published his first

novel in Warsaw and then came to the states in '35. I'm sorry, did I say that IJ came in '35, I meant to say '33. Isaac Bashevis Singer came in '35, brought by his brother. And then we have this almost 10-year gap where he didn't write, where Bashevis didn't write imaginative fiction. I'm not sure that we would want to attribute that to the fact that his brother died and freed him to write. He had enough problems simply adjusting to the postwar world, to the American world, to making a living. To afford the kind of luxury of writing, which he was able to do later.

The odd person out is obviously their sister. Esther was the oldest. She was two years older than IJ with whom she did not have a good relationship. And she was 13 years older than Bashevis, with whom she did not have a good relationship. They cast her as a kind of... "the madwoman in the attic," to use that term. And really never acknowledged her writing. And never... never reconciled. The three of them.

"IJ Singer seem to have been largely forgotten, unfairly in my opinion. Do you think he would be better remembered if his brother were not Isaac Bashevis Singer?"

People have argued that. I don't know that he would have been better remembered than the scores of other Yiddish writers who have been largely forgotten. Remember, he died in '44. His depictions of Eastern European Jewish life and of American life are not what a postwar, an immediate postwar audience would have appreciated. People were looking for much more uplifting and favorable depictions of that world and I think he largely suffers from that.

Yeah. The next comment says a version of that. "IJ might have been better remembered if he hadn't had the misfortune of dying at the age of 50 whereas his brother lived till age 90." Also true.

I think I have missed one... Have I missed anyone? Okay. Are there other questions that... people have?

JESICA PARKER: There is a comment just now about the information about Esther and her relationship with her brothers being very telling and may speak to how IJ depicts women.

ANITA NORICH: I see something that says there was an earlier question about chauvinism. Did I miss... It is hard to keep up with these. Did I miss one? Can you just repeat the question about chauvinism? I think that they...

To go back to Esther, they dismissed Esther, the whole family, I mean they shipped her off to be married in Brussels, in Antwerp and then Brussels and then London, and she goes back to Warsaw at some point but she basically drops out of their lives. The tension about the depiction of women is partly, as one of you, at least one of you...

Yeah, here's the question, "Was it the typical male chauvinism of the time or was it his own relationship with the women in his life, his wife and his mother?"

And the answer is yes. To both of those questions. Clearly we are dealing with a chauvinistic patriarchal worldview here. Whether that is to be attributed to his older sister or to his mother... is a Freudian question I'm not sure I can answer adequately.

He did have... Well there is an interesting line in his memoirs, in which he says... The memoirs are called, were published posthumously. They were serialized, began to be serialized in the *Forverts*, and they're called *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer*, "*From a World Which Is No Longer*." Which already tells you how it is going to go. And he tries to soften the depictions of his parents but he has got one very telling line, well two, actually. At one point he describes his mother as "*a froy mit a mantsbileshen kop*," "a woman with a manly head." You know, with the head of a man. Smart, scholarly. And in another even more telling line... He says... I'm going to say it in Yiddish because that is how I remember it and then I will translate. "*Tate-mame voltn geven a tsugepaste por ven der tate volt geven di mame un di mame der tate*." "My parents would have been a well-matched pair if my mother had been my father and my father my mother." That is, the mother was perceived as masculine and the father as effeminate.

"My question is what do you think the novel says about the labor movement then and in the future. What was his actual feeling about that movement?"

He had gone to the Soviet Union in the '20s in the hopes of finding a, an environment that would be nurturing for Yiddish and for him. And he was disillusioned by, not just by the Yiddish cultural world in the Soviet Union, but by what communism was doing. And, this is, remember, the Stalinist purges start in full force in the '30s. He's already in America. And he dies before the '52 purges that really destroyed Yiddish culture in Russia.

I think that what it says about the labor movement is that it is not going to work. I'm not saying this historically, I'm saying this as his view in this, that this is yet another... Maybe not the labor movement but certainly communism, this is yet another Marxism, this is yet another utopian messianic view. And the fate of Nissan who is all about the labor movement is one indication, and I think a painfully clear one about his hope in the labor movement.

Whoops... "The questions of the interrelationships of the various peoples living in or ruling or exploiting Poland, the Russians, the Germans, the Poles, the Jews, the revolutionaries," I'm sorry, this got cut off. This comes from Murray, would you rephrase it, or do it again?

"How do you think the translation we have shapes our views as readers of *The Brothers Ashkenazi*?"

I would ask you that question. I don't know how it is shaping your view as readers of the novel. I think it is a very good translation. One thing that I would say is that there are some colloquialisms, some depictions that seem a little coarser to me, particularly the

sex scenes, that seem a little coarser to me in the English than in the Yiddish. And that is... That is unavoidable here.

Ah, here we go. "Can you cite any literary influences on IJ Singer outside of Yiddish literature?"

He was more influenced I think by Russian literature than by Yiddish. I think it is in your introduction, which I don't have in front of me, where Goldstein, Rebecca Goldstein, says something like... She quotes something like, "This was the best Yiddish, this may read as the best Yiddish novel that Tolstoy ever wrote," or something of that ilk. But you know, the kind of panoramic historical overview that we see here does remind us a little of *War and Peace*, I think. And the negative, the painfully negative depictions of some of the characters may well remind us of Dostoyevsky. It is important to remember that these writers, and IJ Singer very much among them, were reading European literature. They were reading German and Russian and Polish literature. More than English. But also English in translation. And those were really their interlocutors. Those were really the people that they hoped or thought of themselves as being in conversation with.

"I'm actually listening to an audio version of the book which naturally reflects the narrator's take on the translation."

Yeah. I have that. I started listening to that audio version. And I can't remember who was reading it, but he's a very good reader and it was a very compelling one. One thing that made me mad in that was that he consistently refers to Łódź, that is, he refers to Lodz by its Polish name, which seems to me wrong in a Yiddish novel, even in translation. But it's often useful to listen to those...to those audiobooks.

"The book spoke to me in many ways because my parents lived through this time period and I was born after the war. So many descriptions matched stories of both my mother and father, especially my father who was a disillusioned communist and a disillusioned laborist."

Yeah. He is not unique. I mean, IJ is not unique in this perspective. I think the word "disillusioned" is exactly the right one. Painful though it makes us. I mean uncomfortable though it makes us.

"Wasn't he particularly disappointed that the labor communist, the labor movement communism did not free the Jews the way some of his characters thought it would?"

Absolutely. Absolutely, yes.

"What kind of relationship did IJ have with his son and translator, Joseph?"

He was actually a very loving father from all indications. He was devastated by the death of his son as the family was preparing, of Joseph's brother, as the family was preparing to come to the United States. But, remember, he died when Joseph was, he would have been in his 20s, quite young.

"My earlier question," I guess I missed one, "was to ask you if you think he's a pretty good sociologist in describing these group interrelationships?"

I think, I'm always nervous about reading imaginative literature, novels, short stories, as history or sociology. But, is there one writer's perspective on that history? He's not making all of this up. I mean, he's really describing what is actually, what he actually sees around him. His view of that is not universal. I mean, there certainly are no lack of Yiddish writers who continued to see hope in the labor movement. Even until late, hope in communism, certainly hope in socialism. There are Yiddish writers who saw the same evidence that he saw and it made them more religious. That was not the case with IJ. So, he is certainly depicting something that is going, that is going on around him. And refracting it through his own interpretation of it.

There was a question earlier about Felix Feldblum which I cannot find again.

"What is your view of the role of Felix Feldblum in the novel?"

He's another... Many of these characters represent certain kinds of historical or sociological positions. And Feldblum is described as a *Narodnik*, that is, someone focused on the folk, not the Jewish folk, the Russian folk, and that too eventually... It is gone. That is not the way for the Jews. Felix Feldblum is not any more accepted by his fellow *Narodnikim* then are, then is Nissan or the Communists or the socialists or any of them.

[Laughter]

Thank you to Jonathan who wrote, "Thank you so much for sharing this with us, Go Blue!" I'm from the University of Michigan. Go Blue.

"Do you think," we are coming to the end of our time so let me just take the ones that are here now. "Do you think that Singer implication is that the one constant in Jewish life is anti-Semitism?"

It is not the one constant, but it is a constant. For Singer another constant is again that word "delusion" and the need to resist it. To live with the reality of where one is.

"Did he spend time in Lodz, how did he write about a city if he was not there?"

Lodz was the second largest city in Poland. He never lived there, he no doubt went through, but Lodz was also a major figure in Poland because it was the industrial capital. Not just of Poland, but one could say of Eastern Europe. So, he would have read a lot about it, he would have seen it, would have spoken to people. It was well known. It was well known.

I think we are over our planned time. I'm very sorry. But, I'm sorry I did not hear any voices but I think I got some good sense for what you were writing and I thank you very much for doing this and for giving me the opportunity to talk about this novel.

JESSICA PARKER: Thank you so much Professor Norich. So, I'm going to wrap up our video conference now for the evening. I want to thank Professor Norich for sharing so much for her time and expertise with us, I want to thank Mary, our captioner for this evening, and I want to thank all of you for joining us. For those of you who are local or can travel to the Yiddish Book Center, we are having an in-person discussion about *The Brothers Ashkenazi* led by our academic director Professor Josh Lambert on Monday, April 16 from 10:30 AM to 12 noon. Prof. Norich, you don't have to come in for that.

ANITA NORICH: Josh was my PhD student at Michigan. He's great, you will find him much more entertaining than me.

JESSICA PARKER: So, with that support of that arrangement, please RSVP to me if you would like to join us. The recording from the video conference this evening will be posted online shortly and I will send out the link as soon as it is available and I look forward to seeing you online in June for our next video conference for our next book and details are to come. So, have a good evening everyone, thank you again for joining us, and thank you Prof. Norich.

ANITA NORICH: Pleasure, thank you very much.

JESSICA PARKER: Thank you.