

IMAGES AND EPISODES FROM THE WRITERS' ASSOCIATION HOUSE IN WARSAW: Memoirs of  
Bashevis Singer, Apprentice Journalist

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# IMAGES AND EPISODES FROM THE WRITERS' ASSOCIATION HOUSE IN WARSAW

## Memoirs of Bashevis Singer, Apprentice Journalist

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### ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

#### The First Visit

The Writers' Association House on Tlomackie Street in Warsaw was more than just a writers' club. It was, actually, a center for Yiddish culture and Yiddish literature, as well as a refuge for actors, members of various political parties and plain intellectuals who would come there — I nearly said: come there on pilgrimage. For me, personally, the Writers' Association House was a kind of second home for 13-14 years, plain and simple. My literary development is closely bound up with the institution.

I had heard about the Writers' Association House when I was still living in Bilgoraj, the city where my maternal grandfather, Rabbi Jacob Mordecai Zilberman, served as chiet rabbi for 40 years. In 1917, when my mother took me and my brother Moses from Warsaw to Bilgoraj, the Writers' Association House did not yet exist, as far as I know. My brother Joshua often spoke of the Zamir singing association, where [Y. L.] Peretz used to deliver speeches and the conductor Shneur led his choir, but I never heard him mention the Writers' Association. My guess is that it was founded in 1918 or 1919. Several daily newspapers and weeklies were being published in Yiddish in Warsaw by then. Jewish journalists, authors, textbook writers, public speakers and ordinary Yiddish and Hebrew writers had a need for a professional and spiritual base. Among the founders of the Writers' Association were such figures as Hersch David Nomborg, Noah Prylusi, S. Stupnicky, Yeheskel Moshe Neumann, Dr. Yehoshua Gottlieb, Pincas Lazaro Zitnitzky and



Bashevis Singer during his Warsaw period

possibly also Hillel Zeitlin, his son Aaron Zeitlin, Efraim Kaganowski and many others. There was an Orthodox newspaper published in Warsaw too, and its staff — religious Jews, men of Torah and tradition — were also drawn to the institution.

At that time, fund-raising and organized appeals were as yet unknown. When a group of hasidim wanted their own synagogue, they rented a room, brought in cabinets with books, a holy ark, a table and benches, and there it was — a synagogue. The emancipated Jews did the same. They rented a hall, brought in a few tables and everything was ready.

The Writers' Association House immediately gained fame and prestige. One of the enlightened Jews of Bilgoraj who visited Warsaw reported that he was there and saw with his own eyes nearly all the writers whose novels, poems and articles we provincials read in the papers or in the books that were in Yona Ackerman's library. The man related that the writers ate lunch, supper and maybe even breakfast at a cafeteria in the Writers' Association House. Yiddish papers arrived there from North and South America, England, France and even the Soviet Union. Hebrew periodicals arrived from Eretz Israel, London and other places. Jewish periodicals in other languages — Polish, English, French and German — were also received. Meetings on literary subjects were held there, as well as deliberations on political topics — Zionism, Socialism, Communism — and professional subjects.

Since I am not recording history but personal impressions, I am not obliged to include exact dates. I have the impression that the Yiddish Stage Actors' Association was founded at approximately the same time, or a bit before. Naturally, Jewish painters and sculptors soon became regulars at the Writers' Association House. Strange, but parallel to the founding of the Polish state, a kind of spiritual Jewish state was also established in Poland — a center for ideas, aspirations, theories, fantasies, dreams.

When I first heard the name Writers' Association House, I felt a strong attraction to the institution, like a pin attracted by a magnet. At about that time I had begun to write, and I knew that my destiny and my life would have to be connected with the Writers' Association House. All I had to do was find a room (or part of a room) in Warsaw, and a morsel of bread. I didn't have in mind wasting my life in a forsaken hole. The wide world took shape for me at the house at 13 Tlomackie Street in Warsaw.

I was well aware that it was a one-sided love. True, I yearned for the Writers' Association House, but for them I was nothing more than an unknown boy from the provinces trying to write, and who had not yet published even one line. There were hundreds, thousands like me, with the same ambitions and desires. The enlightened Jew from Bilgoraj related that only writers who wrote for a newspaper or were published in newspapers and periodicals and had made a name for themselves were allowed in. A person could enter this palace of

literature, art and culture only after he had acquired the necessary credentials.

As for me, I was not entirely a stranger to the Writers' Association House. I had an older brother, I. J. Singer, who had been published in the newspapers. However, few people had heard of him, inasmuch as he had been in Russia during 1917-21 and witnessed the Kerensky Revolution, the October Revolution, the pogroms and the riots. Returning to Poland, he settled in Warsaw and worked on a Yiddish paper.

Before going to Russia he had served as secretary to the Zamir society. He knew Peretz personally. He was a close friend of the historian E. N. Frank. He had taken up painting for a while, sharing his atelier with such artists as Ostazgo and Robinlicht, whom I met in 1914 when my brother hid out with them to avoid the Russian draft.

I also had another tie to literature. I read nearly everything written by Yiddish authors — Linetzky, Isaac Meir Dick, Mendele Mokher Seforim, Shalom Aleichem, Peretz, Frishman, Sholem Asch, Nomberg, Abraham Reisen, Yeushzohn (his novel, *The Rabbi's Court*), David Cassel, Dan Kaplanovitch, David Bergelson, Der Nister, Anokhi (his novel, *Reb Abba*) and many others. I even read several works by Yiddish writers in America, such as Morris Rosenfeld, Kobrin, Libin, Berkowitz and others. Every Yiddish book was an experience for me, every periodical or paper that reached Bilgoraj a revelation. All these writers were like relatives with whom I was involved. This did not prevent me from feeling a similar spiritual closeness with the literary giants of the world whom I read in Yiddish, Hebrew and later Polish and even German translation.

Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Strindberg, Maupassant, Hemson, Lermontov, Chekhov, Andreyev, Szenkiewicz, Mickiewicz and Pushkin were the closest to me. I was more excited about them than about Yiddish or Hebrew writers. I read their works with a fervor that was inextinguishable. I was, if I may say, an anonymous potential writer, a sort of secret literary righteous soul, one of the 36 who would one day be revealed to the world — and to himself. Innumerable obstacles stood in my way until I could arrive at the literary palace, but I knew inside me that I had to get there. I felt creative powers within myself. They churned inside me, along with the desire for love and sex. My adolescent thoughts were sunk in philosophy. The problems that preoccupied Plato, Zeno, Aristo, Spinoza, Descartes, Leibnitz, Kant and Schopenhauer were also my problems, my questions. I spent time with the boys and girls in Bilgoraj as if in a dream. I listened but didn't listen to what they said. I was friendly with them. But sooner or later I would have to leave them and set out on my own way. My small,

private accounts, such as how to earn a few pennies by giving a lesson, how to avoid persecution by the ultra-Orthodox, how to get along with father and mother, went hand in hand with my large accounts with the world.

I got hold of a translation of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* from somewhere. I heard about Pyotr Kropotkin. I read Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. A translation of Edgar Allan Poe fell into my hands. I knew poems by Bialik, Tchernichowsky, Jacob Fichmann, Ya'akov Cahan and Shneur by heart. The big intellectuals were not always big. The small ones were not always tiny. Lessons in philosophy, psychology and mysticism flowed from the mouths of simple people, housemaids, women who came to pour out their hearts to my mother. I studied people's behavior, their madnesses, eccentricities, perversions in discussions and stories which I heard in the synagogue study hall, in the Trisk hasidim synagogue, from boys who were members of the Young Mizrahi movement. The world appeared to me a golden visage of images, poesy, originality, folklore, mysticism, superstition and much else. My Yiddish language was rich and picturesque, and could convey the subtlest sensations and deepest thoughts. I discovered the world of the spirit in all its richness. Treasures unfolded in the alleys of every village, every remote hamlet. One had only to know how to gather them up. I searched for the means, the methods to accomplish this, and made plans — untenable, fantastical, immature, but still as old as the human creative impulse. I had to acquire my daily bread, a bed to sleep in and patience, as well as ink and paper. The rest was unimportant.

Yes, love. Every girl, every young woman had her own charm which she would share with a mate. In a certain way, they were all alike. But with that, each was different, a unique product of the heavenly Creator. A bundle of individualism.

Years would pass until I received legitimization to enter the Writers' Association House, but actually I already belonged to it.

That was my situation and those were my feelings when I first crossed the threshold of the Writers' Association House.

It was at the end of the summer, possibly the month of Elul 1922, or perhaps 1921. I arrived in Warsaw, and my brother Joshua was already there, having returned from Russia disappointed with Communism, and in fact with all the isms. I came to him and asked him to help me get settled in Warsaw, but he himself had no job or apartment; besides, he had brought a wife and a child with him from Russia. Fortunately for him, his in-laws were in Warsaw, and he lived with them in a tiny back room. But at that time he was at a summer dacha near the railway line and I joined him and his family there. Although it may seem strange, renting a summer house in

Warsaw was something that only near-beggars did. Rich people lived in private villas, and many of them traveled to sanatoriums and spas. The rented summer houses were nothing more than a room and a kitchen located in a sandy area, without electricity, water (which had to be brought from the well), linens or kitchen utensils. It was called living in the forest, but there was no forest, only a sparse grove of short, skimpy fir trees. The engine whistles sounded all day long and late into the night. Various trains passed tiredly (sometimes at a crawl), including the luxury train between Warsaw and Lemberg. The *goyim* in the area, quasi-farmers, were not particularly friendly to the Jews who came there to breathe some fresh air. My brother rented two rooms and a kitchen, but he shared them with me and with his wife's family, who would arrive for the Sabbath and sometimes during the week as well.

Both my brother and I came to Warsaw to find work, any kind of work. Although my brother had been promised a job on a newspaper, it turned out that it was a promise no one intended to keep. He was supposed to have replaced a proofreader at *Folks-Zeitung*, a Socialist newspaper, but he let slip a few words that didn't fit in with the party platform, and at the last minute they gave the job to someone else who had had enough sense to watch what he said. As for me, no one had promised me anything. No one knew me. I was a Bar-Mitzva boy when I had left Warsaw. I had wasted years in a forsaken village. My brother told his friends — beggars like himself — that he had a brother who was trying to write, but every young person who could hold a pen in his hand was also trying to write.

My brother had already become a member of the Writers' Association House and he took me with him to show me the sanctuary of Yiddish literature. We entered through a door that was no grander than the door of the house we had once lived in. A sign indicated that the hall belonging to Mizrahi, the religious Zionist movement, was on the second floor. A Jew dressed in a sort of short half-frock coat, half-*kapote*, which came down to his knees, went up the stairs with us. His black hat was also a sort of combination rabbi's hat and secular hat. His beard was black and thick, but I noticed that he had trimmed it a bit at the edges. A wide black tie extended from under a white collar. That was approximately how the German "*rabiners*" dressed, as well as missionaries who tried to prove by Biblical verses that Jesus was the true messiah and that so long as the Jews did not accept him, they would have no respite, neither in this world nor the next. My brother let him pass and told me that he was an expounder of Scriptures who was called a "preacher," a person who uttered pearls of wisdom. We went up to the floor where the Writers'

Association House was and my brother opened the door. At that moment, my dream became reality.

I saw before me a large hall with a cafeteria and small tables, like a restaurant but different. The walls were hung with paintings and drawings. The people who were eating at the tables were not ordinary kinds of people such as I had seen in restaurants and cafeterias in Warsaw. These people had different kinds of faces with a different kind of expression. Their clothes also seemed different to me, although at the moment I could not decide in what way they were different. Nearly all the diners wore glasses. Some were eating, some were talking with their companions seated opposite, their discussions accompanied by gestures that also seemed different to me. Simultaneous with eating noodle soup, biting into a quarter of a chicken or sucking bone marrow, they debated a topic which apparently preoccupied them all. Some of the faces reflected anger, some were laughing, others expressed negation, still others tried to protect, to appease, to compromise.

Someone wearing gold-rimmed glasses, with a bald pate that

shone like a mirror, waved his fork, on which a piece of white meat was impaled, and kept shaking his head no. I could not hear what he was saying in the tumult, but it seemed to me that the expression on his face said: "You don't understand me at all. I am referring to something else entirely." One eye laughed mockingly, while the other registered astonishment that someone had interpreted what he had said as totally opposite from what he had intended.

A woman sitting near the door pointed at me angrily, indicating that I had no right to be there, but my brother explained to her that I was his brother, and her eyes laughed and she said:

"Yes, of course, you look as alike as two drops of water."

I was so excited and confused by being there, that for a moment I forgot my shyness. I had the feeling that I knew everyone who was sitting there, that I had seen them before somewhere, that I had heard their voices. But when? Where? Perhaps in a previous incarnation...

A few moments later my brother brought me into a second hall, larger and more elegant than the first. There were small

### An Author With Journalistic Habits / Israel Zamir

My father began his literary career as a proofreader for a Yiddish literary newspaper in Warsaw. Later, he became a journalist, but simultaneously he produced literature. All of his books were written chapter by chapter and serialized in the *Forward*, which necessitated constructing the plot so that each segment was self-contained. He had to produce two chapters — about 2,000 words — a week, an intensive pace.

The limitations of a fixed wordage quota dictated that when the plot ran out at, say, 1,500 words, he had to pad the rest of the segment, while, alternatively, he sometimes had to cut descriptive sections and compress the plot for lack of space.

Once all the segments were completed, the material was translated into English, whereupon he reworked the plot, expanding or cutting it according to his literary inclinations. Mostly he cut the journalistic elements and developed the plot further, insisting that all translations be done from the final English version only, as it differed considerably from the original journalistic version.

My father supported himself as a journalist during most of his

life, using various pseudonyms: D. Segal, Y. Varshavski and Isaac Bashevis. His interviewing talent, reflected in many of his stories, was a product of his journalistic experience. Many of his heroes were people whom he sat with at his habitual cafeteria, Steinberg's (later, when it closed, he moved to the American Restaurant), listening to what they said. A skillful interviewer, he minimized his own presence and let his characters speak for themselves.

His lead technique was another example of the influence of journalism on his work. Most of his stories and books open with a gripping lead that immediately brings the reader into the atmosphere and events of the story and does not allow his attention to stray.

He loved the "field," which for him was the cafeteria, or Broadway, where he strolled with friends, or a plane trip. He had a talent for discovering characters, and he extracted their stories easily, without writing down a word.

He was a talented journalist and an equally talented literary writer, and he blended the two with great success.

tables here too, and people were sitting and eating as well, but the place seemed more elegant, more comfortable. This wasn't simply a restaurant, but a club, the kind I imagined when reading novels about England, especially Jules Verne's *Eighty Days Around the World*, the club where Phileas Fogg wagered he could travel around the world in 80 days.

My shyness returned and I felt I was blushing. I was also warm. I felt dizzy for a moment and everything looked hazy. I heard someone call out:

"Joshua, hello. Where did you disappear to during the cold days? And who's this? Your brother! Look, look at the redhead!"

He clapped his hands and began laughing loudly, the nasal laugh of someone who enjoys laughing, who wants to prolong the laughter until it becomes hysterical. Despite my great nervousness, I recognized him: it was the poet Peretz Markish, the Futurist, who wrote in broad lines, in assonances instead of rhymes, in volleys of words like stones, like bullets, like bombs. He, and his portrait, were known even in remote Bilgoraj.

Markish was one of the handsomest men I ever knew: of average height, slim, curly-haired, his eyes proud and intelligent. He could have been a model for a statue of a Greek god, possibly even Apollo himself. He was dressed as befitted a Russian revolutionary, in a black shirt with a folded lapel. Everything about him radiated a sense of the new era, the great revolution that came from the Soviet Union and was going to overtake the entire world. "A broadcast, a broadcast, a radio broadcast to the world, a broadcast from the king of bells of Moscow," he wrote in one of his poems. He announced the advent of the new era in bombastic sentences in the introductions to his books and to the periodical *Khaliastre* ("Gang"), which he edited. The revolution will destroy and uproot everything old and mouldy, faith in God, all the rot of the bourgeoisie and the petit-bourgeoisie, and, of course, it would reduce what was termed the classicists of literature and art, and possibly even of science, to nothing. The entire universe would present itself to serve under the red flag, in the service of the proletarian dictatorship. Everything would be new, different, revolutionary.

I had the opportunity to read this tempestuous rhetoric when I stayed at my brother's summer house, and even though I was a young boy with no life-experience, just starting to write, still I sensed that there was no backing, no truth at all behind this screaming. The world would not become suddenly new, nor would man. The new literature which Markish praised so much was nothing more than wild exaggeration, and was boring from the very beginning.

I said so to my brother, but since he was Markish's friend

and also participated in *Khaliastre*, he could not agree with me. He also spoke tentatively about new winds blowing through the world, and said that literature must be modernized. He even tried to write an article in the new style. In a way, I was older than my brother then. What happened to him did not happen to me. I was not entranced by slogans. I did not get at all excited about Mayakovsky's "A Cloud in Pants" or Alexander Block's verses: "Door and gate are locked / Tonight the gods will be robbed."

I could not become enthusiastic about people who stigmatized Jews like my father with the epithet "black raven" or "blood-sucking clericist," and who condemned peddlers, shopkeepers and all the Jews with whom I grew up, most of whom were as wretchedly poor as the proletariat. There was no justification for blaming them for not becoming Leninists even before Lenin himself was born. I knew that in Russia Jews like that were being shot, and that the local Jewish poets applauded cleaning out the "petit-bourgeois filth" and thanked Comrade Dzerzhinsky for it.

The fact was that I had acquired a great deal of information about the revolution from my brother. He told me about murders that made my blood boil. Most of the time he would end his story by saying: That's human nature.

Yes, that is human nature, I knew. In the name of Christian love, man instituted Inquisitions and dragged Jews and atheists to the stake. In the name of equality, freedom and brotherhood he lopped off heads (mostly his friends' heads) at the guillotine. In the name of anarchism he tossed bombs at innocent people. In the name of nationalism he shed seas of blood. There is no "ism," there is no vision of "a better tomorrow" or "a happy future" which did not elicit murder or torture in its name. My brother knew all this better than I, but he also thought that the phrases by Izzy Carik, Itzik Fefer and Peretz Markish would not make the world any worse than it already was. He was in a position at the time where he had to belong to some group.

I sat and listened to the discussion between Markish and my brother, while eyeing what was happening in the hall. A large picture of Y. L. Peretz hung over a stage. The picture dominated the entire hall. Peretz looked almost alive, and I had the feeling that he was supervising everything that was happening in the writers' club like a father, a spiritual mentor, lest anyone, God forbid, betray his Yiddishism, his mother tongue, his ideal of cultural autonomy. Peretz himself had been a socialist for a while, but his spirit was bound up with Yiddish, with Yiddish folklore, with the values created by the East European Jew. Thank God, I said to myself, no one kills people in the name of Yiddishism, no one throws people into jail or

exiles them to Siberia in the name of Yiddishism. That was the situation then. Later, they imprisoned Yiddish writers and even lined them up against the wall if someone found even a hint of Trotskyism in their works. Sometimes the "someone" was a Yiddish writer or critic himself. But I mustn't get ahead of myself; or, as they say in Yiddish: "One needn't catch the fish before casting the net."

Markish's discussions with my brother encompassed Yiddish books, books that were being published and a certain periodical, possibly the *Khaliastre*, but Markish's tone was deprecating, scornful of all "civilian" Yiddish literature, and in fact of Judaism in general. According to the bible of Communist Jews, progressive Jewish history began in October 1917. What came before included the Torah, the Hebrew language, clericalism, reactionism, fanaticism and Zionism. Even the Bundists, who also opposed Zionism, clericalism and the Hebrew language, were disqualified by "the people of tomorrow's world" and were included with those whom the revolution would have to sweep away with its broom of fire. The Jewish Communist felt the power of the world revolution backing him. He was not in exile like the rest of us. Communism reigned in Russia — a territory that comprised one-sixth of the planet. Today or tomorrow Communism was bound to conquer India, China, Germany, France, England, even America. Every Jewish Communist was a potential red commissar, a second Trotsky, a second Kamenev, a second Rikov, a second Zinoviev and perhaps even a second Dzerzhinsky.

Both of them, Markish and my brother, had a biting sense of humor. I liked a good joke too. But the way the Jewish Communist mocked our entire history and the devotion of the Jewish people, referring to all our values with such derision, in quotation marks — all this saddened me. I had been educated with the sense that there was nothing to fear from anyone who spoke Yiddish. This was the first time in my life that Yiddish words, and even jokes in Yiddish, frightened me. I myself belonged to those Jews whom the revolution was supposed to sweep away, burn, erase. I still wrote in Hebrew from time to time during that period. I took an interest in Kabbalah and in Hasidism. I believed in devils, ghosts and demons. I was in no way prepared to spit on Moses our Master, on the prophet Isaiah, on the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*, on all the rabbis and hasidim who were my forefathers. Nor was I prepared to spit on all the classicists of world literature and gamble everything on the scribbles that were published in *Khaliastre*.

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Of all the troubles I suffered from during my youth, perhaps the worst and the most ridiculous was my shyness. I was shy, and I didn't actually know why. Was it because of my neglected attire? Because of my flame-red hair? Because I wasn't able to earn a penny, because I had no profession, no formal education, I didn't speak proper Polish? Young women, girls, would come to the hall. Young fellows my age or a bit older met them, said hello to them, kissed their hand, joked with them, sat down with them at a table, ordered tea, lit up a cigarette and offered one to the girl. And I remained an agitated, frightened yeshiva boy. On the other hand, I might have felt similarly alien in a yeshiva.

The door opened and a tiny man entered — extremely thin, just skin and bones. He wore a light-colored suit, a colorful tie, yellow shoes, a straw hat. He looked ill. One eye was large, the other small, half-shut, and it looked like a glass eye. I knew him: the well-known writer and journalist H. D. Nomberg.

He glanced at the table where my brother sat with Markish and immediately turned his head away. Nomberg couldn't stand the modernists. He called them graphomaniacs.

He cast a questioning look at me and raised his thin shoulders. His feet seemed leaden and he dragged them rather than walked on them. He trudged to the stage, where there was a piano. On it was a gramophone of the type called a patiphone. I watched him place a record on the turntable and start turning the handle. Immediately, instrumental and vocal music was heard. If I recall correctly, it was a tango. That an elderly and ill Yiddish writer should be interested in this sort of thing seemed to me very strange. But I had heard strange stories about Nomberg. The weaker and sicker he became — he was actually critically ill — the more of a hedonist and pleasure-seeker he became in his last years. He abandoned all ideals and came to the conclusion that so long as man breathed, he must grab as much enjoyment as he could. Nomberg learned to dance the modern dances — the tango, the shimmy, the foxtrot, the Charleston. He danced often at the Writers' Association House. I saw that he was looking about for someone — a dancing partner. One of the young women sitting at a table with a young man got up, smiled and gestured to the young man and approached Nomberg. If he was exceptionally short, she was unusually tall. He lifted his small head to her with its remnants of blond and gray hair, barely managing to put his small hand on her shoulder, and they began to dance. Markish's eyes filled with laughter.

My brother and Markish made fun of other writers. I heard them calling S. Y. Stupnicki a good-for-nothing. That made me angry. I had read Stupnicki's book on Spinoza. In my opinion, Stupnicki was a first-rate scholar. And here they

were, calling him a good-for-nothing. If Stupnicki was a good-for-nothing, what was I? Markish said about another writer that everything he wrote was garbage. I had never heard talk like that about a writer. Of course there are better writers and worse writers, but how could one deprecate a person's work that way? I had read that author's works. He wasn't a belletrist, but rather a journalist, or an essayist.

The two began mocking Hillel Zeitlin. I regarded Hillel Zeitlin as a god, actually. I had read his book *On the Problem of Good and Bad*. I had also read many articles of his in *Moment*. Hillel Zeitlin was steeped in Jewish and general knowledge. He wrote in-depth essays on Nietzsche, on Shestov and on the Kabbalah. The two jesters, my brother and Markish, did not actually criticize Zeitlin, but they made fun of his beard, his long hair and his religiosity. They gave the impression that he was only pretending to be religious, and that he was really an atheist. Several years previously, the Bundist leader Jacob Pat had slandered Zeitlin, claiming he had seen him eating non-kosher food at a railway station, I think at Bialystok. I was a young boy then, but I remember the matter was discussed in our home. It turned out that Zeitlin had eaten a hard-boiled egg there, and eggs are not non-kosher unless there is a spot of blood. The whole affair was nothing but a Marxist slander of a religious writer. Jacob Pat no doubt considered it an atheist "mitzva" to embarrass a religious writer. Yatzkan, the editor of *Heint*, a competing paper, was exposed for this gossip, and the controversy over the affair went on for weeks. My brother and Markish referred to the scandal.

I described myself as a secularist then, a free thinker, but even then I differentiated between belief in the revelation of God and belief in a higher force that directs the world. I had read about Kant's and Laplace's cosmological theories that the solar system developed from a nebula, and all that followed from it. But where did the cosmic nebula itself come from? The truth is that the current theory of "the big bang," the enormous explosion that created the Milky Way and the other galaxies, is the direct descendant of Kant's and Laplace's theories, and is as childish and light-headed as theirs. Whether the universe developed from a nebula slowly, or was created by an explosion like a bomb in a fraction of a second, the riddle remains: what is the origin of the explosion? Of course, one could ask similarly: And what is the origin of God? Yet for some reason, it is easier for me to imagine a God who exists for all eternity, than a lifeless mass of material.

I beg the readers' indulgence for this slight digression from the subject. I could never believe that the world was simply accidental. I always believed that a spirit, a plan, a goal lay behind the laws of physics and chemistry, and that brought me

closer to religious thinking. I would put it this way: I believed in God, but not in men, in their testimonies, in their books, in their philosophies. Perhaps this way of thinking was what caused my shyness. I did not belong to any side. This kind of thinking isolated me. I was not a Jew and not a goy, not totally an atheist and not a believer in the accepted sense. I remained that way until this very day.

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I mentioned graphomania and graphomaniacs before. These are concepts rarely used in English, but frequently used in European languages. The Europeans believe that writing can sometimes become a madness. Actually, the entire civilized world suffers from this madness. There is also a question as to whether it can be defined as a malady. The lust for writing is identical with the need to speak, to communicate. The pen or the typewriter do exactly what the mouth, the tongue and the lips did thousands of years ago: convey thoughts and feelings, mostly expressions of disappointment, fantasies and dreams. If speaking is not a madness, then neither is writing. One cannot expect that only talented people will utilize this power. The number of books, periodicals and newspapers has grown from generation to generation. Man seeks and finds new means of communication all the time: telegraph, telephone, film, theater, television. The Torah says that when Joshua, son of Nun, came and told Moses that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp, and that he, Joshua, was prepared to kill them, Moses responded: Would that all of God's people were prophets.

The Writers' Association House on Tłomackie Street in Warasaw expressed Moses' wish, in a way. There was a bit of prophet, a bit of writer in every Jew in Poland, and in some way the Writers' Association House symbolized the Jewish need (and the general human need) to express the "I" in words.

The founders of the Writers' Association tried to define an author and a journalist precisely — who could belong and who could not — but creative impulses sometimes break down all categories, all definitions, all limits. Sometimes there is only one step between the reader and the writer. The hundreds of thousands of Jews in Poland who spoke Yiddish and read Yiddish papers and Yiddish books were nearly all potential writers. Each one of them had an account with God and with the world. Every one of them had something to say. Every one of them tried to free himself from the trap he had gotten himself into, or others had gotten him into, and the only means of doing so, or the easiest means, was the word, the scream, the claim on himself or on others.

I was one of those young Jews. I could no longer be that type of Jew which my religious parents wanted to make of me — someone who was not me; neither could I be, nor did I want to be, a *goy*. I could not live with faith in God — and I could not live without Him. I strove for the wide and free world, but I had realized for some time that the world was not so wide and so free as I had imagined. Ideas plagued me like locusts. Excitement churned inside me both when I slept and when I was awake. There was only one way I could express it: through the pen, in my Yiddish language. However, I immediately saw that countless others had the same need. Many of us had long sensed the approach of a holocaust. Others believed that the solution to all our troubles was to be found in Russia. Still others hoped that Palestine was the gate of redemption.

The management of the Writers' and Journalists' Association printed membership cards for authors, journalists and a number of guests. They posted a woman near the door to see to it that those who did not belong would not burst in. But no guard, no amount of guarding, could stop the stream of breakers-in, those for whom the Writers' Association House could be, or must be, their home. People came with various excuses. I was I. J. Singer's brother. Someone else had published a poem or an article in some provincial local paper. Others came to buy a ticket to a lecture and meanwhile entered to glimpse the priests of the Yiddish word. Some spent their last meager pennies on printing a book or pamphlet that would entitle them to membership in the association. Many tourists from America were curious enough to visit the Writers' House and convey regards from far-off America.

Actors and actresses and musicians all had some sense of belonging to Yiddish culture, to Hebrew culture, to Zionism, Socialism, Anarchism or vegetarianism and tried to approach the authors in order to share their spiritual experiences.

This whole question of a hall where entry was forbidden was alien to the Jew. Synagogues and study halls were always open to all. A rabbi's door, a teacher's door, a preacher's door was never closed to any Jew. To lock yourself in was an attribute of the *goy*.

Not only men, but young Jewish women wanted to come there. The idea of assimilation had gone bankrupt in Poland by the start of the 1920s. True, many young Jewish men and women had been educated in Polish culture, but Polish society rejected them no less than it did a Yiddish-speaking woman. The jokers in the Writers' Association House called these women "literary supplements." But everywhere the modern man went, the modern woman wanted to go as well. She wanted to exhibit her beauty, her dress, her education, her charm and her intelligence. She dreamed of making contact with an author, of falling in love with him, of helping him translate his work into the language of the *goyim*, which she generally knew better than he, since the parents who sent their sons to a yeshiva sent their daughters to a gymnasium.

I saw these young women arguing with the door-woman, trying to prove that they had some sort of right to enter. Someone had invited them — a member or a guest or a guest of a guest.

I personally had limited right of entry, but sometimes I tried to help someone who wanted to get in.