

The Holocaust Survivors in Isaac Bashevis Singer's Shosha

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Abstract

In the novel taken for study, the characters doubt the existence of God and go in for worldly wisdom. They suffer and also make people around them suffer due to their worldly ways. Only at the end, they realize that without faith in God and His ways, they will perish. They return to God knowing that they will be safe only when they are in the hands of God.

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Shosha, is a novel of remembrance. It invokes the past by different means and for different ends. Building a montage of eyewitness accounts, Singer emphasizes the shared horror of experiences that have permanently traumatized his major characters. So crucial is remembrance in shaping the novel's texture that action and motivation are virtually indecipherable without reference to the past. In Shosha, however, the past is merely a backdrop for the personal reminiscences that Singer treats elsewhere as straightforward autobiography. Although it was published in English before *The Penitent*, Shosha is Singer's latest novel in point of composition.

Serialized in Yiddish in the *Forward* in 1974 as *Soul Expeditions*, Shosha was published in English in 1978, nearly simultaneously with *A Young Man in Search of Love*, a volume of memoirs. Shosha's first-person narration and its slavish fidelity to actual events are unique among Singer's translated novels, and highlight his growing tendency to rely upon his life for his fiction. A short first chapter that telescopes the boyhood of Aaron Greidinger, Singer's alter ego, and an equally short epilogue that locates him after the Holocaust, sandwiches Aaron's account of his early life.

Set in the Warsaw of the 1930s, his self-portrait of the artist as a young man draws its every detail from corresponding events in Singer's life. This deliberate blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction need not testify to a flagging of creative energy, but rather to Singer's endless compulsion, announced in the author's note to *In My Father's Court*, to call back "a life and environment that no longer exist and are unique." The invocation of the past in Shosha seems, therefore, not so much a means to an end as an end in itself.

Shosha chronicles Jewish losses by stressing the proximity of the Holocaust. Hitler's extinction of Polish Jewry, a fait accompli in *Enemies*, *A Love Story*, looms on the horizon in Shosha. Sharing the setting of *The Family Moskat*, Shosha also shares its overpowering sense of doom, although the German bombs that punctuate the closing pages of *The Family Moskat* have yet to fall when the main action of Shosha concludes.

Asa Heshel's despair in *The Family Moskat* is everywhere apparent in Shosha and is echoed in Aaron's "I know for sure that we will all be destroyed". The Jews in Poland are trapped between Hitler and Stalin in a country where they are so hated that their Gentile neighbours "would not shed tears" at their demise: "Whoever is going to win this coming war will liquidate us" (131). Aware of their powerlessness to prevent their imminent destruction,

many Polish Jews live lives of frenzied desperation, trying to jam all possible pleasure into their last days. "We all lived for the present-the whole Jewish community" (241), admits Aaron.

Affluent Jews such as Haiml Chentshiner and intellectuals such as Morris Feitelzohn, who could easily leave the country, remain in Poland, deliberately blinding themselves to the future. Their self-induced paralysis ironically counterpoints the quickening pace of their daily lives, so that the major characters in *Shosha* appear to be running in place. Hedonistic theories of all sorts are cultivated to justify the unbridled pursuit of instant gratification. Feitelzohn conceives of a "play-temple of ideas" where indecisive pleasure-seekers would engage in "soul expeditions" to discover what might "amuse or inspire them most" (242). Haiml wants to pretend that every day is a holiday and should be celebrated accordingly, with festive meals and singing. His desire "to create our own calendar" (242) perfectly epitomizes the pathetic attempt by the Warsaw Jews to ignore the tragedy implicit in the real calendar.

For Aaron Greidinger sex provides the release from time that is the ultimate goal of Feitelzohn's soul expeditions and Haiml's festivities. A necessary component of all initiation stories, sex is nonetheless treated more obsessively in *Shosha* than in Singer's other novels. In this as in other respects *Shosha* resembles the appropriately titled *A Young Man in Search of Love*, the autobiographical account of Singer's own initiation, Aaron's "lusting after the whole female gender" is expressed in his simultaneous affairs with several women whose originals appear in Singer's memoirs. Dora Stolnitz, for example, recalls his real-life Communist landlady-mistress in *A Young Man in Search of Love*. Even while he is still living with Dora, Aaron becomes involved with Haiml's wife, Celia, and shortly thereafter with Betty Slonim, the mistress of visiting American millionaire Sam Dreiman, and with Tekla, a Polish maid.

The apparent aimlessness of Aaron's love life, like that of an earlier initiate, Asa Heshel of *The Family Moskat*, reflects not only an obsession with pleasure-taking while time remains but also a predictable reaction against his straitlaced traditional upbringing. Like the callow Singer of *A Young Man in Search of Love*, Aaron blushes and stammers constantly around women, remaining congenitally shy even as he adds to a number of conquests. Although he is well into his thirties before the main action of *Shosha* concludes, Aaron remains the eternal adolescent, sharing this dubious distinction with Singer's former fictional womanizers such as Asa Heshel, Yasha Mazur, and Herman Broder. Lovers and friends habitually address Aaron by childish nicknames or diminutives. "He writes like a grown-up but he's still a child," claims Celia, dubbing him Tsutsik, a name that sticks to Aaron throughout the novel. To *Shosha*, he is forever Arele, the little boyfriend of their childhood.

Shosha is the perfect title character for a novel devoted to the remembrance of things past. Aaron's childhood sweetheart, she appears briefly-but decisively-in the introductory chapter dealing with his early years in Warsaw. Thereafter she drops out of sight, only to reappear miraculously unchanged many years later, when Aaron takes Slonim on a visit to his old neighbourhood. In a novel whose hero is drawn relentlessly back into his own childhood, whose supporting cast is largely recruited from earlier works, and whose manifest purpose is to celebrate a vanished world, *Shosha* embodies the unadulterated essence of the past. Her symbolic importance in the life of her creator-"She was my first love and actually these kinds of love never die"-is reaffirmed most recently in "The Beginning".

Shosha figures prominently in this revealing piece of “spiritual autobiography”, written in 1984 to introduce the collected edition of Singer’s three volumes of memoirs. “The Beginning” recapitulates the childhood relationship between Aaron and Shosha down to the very story he tells her about King Solomon’s wives and treasures. She fills Aaron’s dreams as her real-life counterpart filled Singer’s: “I fantasized about lying with Shosha in bed,” recalls Singer some seventy years later. It is the same persistence of memory, identifying Shosha with the lost innocence of his boyhood, that explains Aaron’s otherwise unfathomable decision to marry her. Almost twenty years after leaving Krochmalna Street, Aaron returns with Betty to find everything exactly as it was before” “Shosha had neither grown nor aged....In her eyes was the same childish fascination I remembered from the times I told her stories” (76-77).

Physically and mentally retarded, locked in perpetual childhood yet innocent and incorruptible, she is the past incarnate. Much later in the novel Betty offers Aaron a visa for America, which he refuses in order to remain with Shosha, “the only woman I trust.” While Betty accepts this cynical version of his marriage, the realtruth about Shosha had already come out in the aftermath of the Krochmalna Street visit, when to Betty’s “What do you see in her?” Aaron replied, “I see myself” (81). So definitively is Shosha a creature of the past that when she and Aaron flee eastward to escape the German invaders, she suddenly “sat down” on the road to Bialystok, “and a minute later she was dead” (267). Detached from the past that had sustained her, Shosha ceases to exist.

What Aaron sees in Shosha is not only his own lost innocence but a vanished way of life. Krochmalna Street, so perfectly preserved that when Aaron’s mother returns to her old haunts for his wedding she remarks, “Nothing has changed”, is the symbolic last bastion of traditional Jewish existence. Moishe, Aaron’s younger brother and a rabbi like her father, stares incredulously at Aaron’s modern appearance and dress. For Moishe and their mother time has stood still, they are less amazed by Krochmalna Street’s changelessness than by Aaron’s transformation.

It is to the timeless world of their Jewishness that Aaron sporadically yearns to return, but of course cannot. No less than kitchen smells and memories of childhood games the appearance of his mother and brgirlother-mirror images of Singer’s own-evokes the nostalgia for the past that permeates Shosha. Singer’s idealization of a crumbling ghetto and a retarded girl is an extreme instance of of his habitual advocacy of the past at the expense of the present. As usual his enlightened Jews are neurotic and ineffectual, their lives aimless and empty. Feitelzohn’s soul expeditions-the blind gropings of the faithless-hopelessly counterfeit religious belief. Aaron shares with Singer’s other twentieth century heroes, and with Singer himself, the incapacity to return to what he calls “real Jewishness.” Yet his decision not to abandon Shosha for Betty’s visa offer is his finest moment; it testifies to his undying devotion, if not to the substance of belief, then at least to his symbol.

Symbolized in his personal life by his attachment to Shosha, reverence for the past also inspires Aaron’s writing. His budding literary career in Warsaw, closely paralleling Singer’s own, shares equal billing with his sexual adventures. And just as the past-in the person of Shosha-dominates his private life, its very existence dominates his writing. Aaron’s devotion to the minutiae of his early family and neighbourhood life expresses his conviction “that the aim of literature was to prevent time from vanishing” (16).

Like Singer, who endlessly mines the past for his subject matter, Aaron conceives of Krochmalna Street as “a deep stratum of an archaeological dig which I would never uncover. At the same time, I recalled every house, courtyard, cheder, Hasidic studyhouse, store; every girl, street loafer, housewife-their voices, gestures, manners of speaking, their peculiarities” (16). Nearing the end of his life in Warsaw, taking what he knows will be his last walk down the mean streets of the Jewish ghetto, Aaron tries “to engrave in my memory each alley, each building, each store, each face” (257).

The net effect of his early immersion in an ancient but outdated tradition is, however, as inhibiting as it is inspiring. From its first sentence, when Aaron remembers that he “was brought up on three dead languages-Hebrew, Aramic, and Yiddish”- Shosha raises questions about the choice of a literary medium. For an aspiring writer of Aaron’s background, choosing the appropriate language in which to write is as crucial as deciding what to write about. Like the young Singer, Aaron experiments with Hebrew before settling on Yiddish, unable at the outset of his career “to find a style that might create a literary domain for myself” (14).

That the choice of Yiddish doesn’t guarantee an audience is initially apparent in Aaron’s many rejected manuscripts. It grows more apparent as the note of impending doom is sounded more and more urgently in Shosha. Questions of linguistic strategy are rendered most by the Holocaust, which in large part destroys the audience. Desperation underlies Aaron’s foray into the notoriously cheap and vulgar Yiddish theatre. His many rewrites of *The Maiden of Ludmir* correspond to the changing whims and fancies of Sam Dreiman, the play’s financial backer, and of Betty Slonim, its leading lady.

A hopeless tangle of artistic compromises, *The Maiden of Ludmir* is never staged. Aaron’s first success in reaching a large audience comes only with his serialized biography of Jacob Frank, the false messiah, in a Yiddish newspaper. Inspired by its popularity, Aaron begins a new novel, which, like Singer’s *Satan in Goray*, deals with the earlier “messiah,” Sabbatai Zevi, and exploits the past as a window on the present.

Nowhere in Shosha is it suggested that literature, even that which commemorates the past, is anything but a poor substitute for religion. To Celia, who worships art, Aaron cynically defines writers as the “same kind of entertainers as magicians.....I admire someone who can balance a barrel on his feet more than I do a poet” (59). Assessing a writing career that amounts to little more than “a meaningless booklet from the Writers’ Club and some worthless manuscripts,” Aaron reviles the “meaningless literature” for which he has exchanged “four thousand years of Jewishness” (256).

But literature, no matter what its failings, is not the natural adversary of religion; Aaron’s Jewishness was lost before his writing career began. Singer’s twentieth-century heroes-Asa Heshel Bannet, Herman Broder, and Aaron Greidinger-known as well as their predecessors that they can solve the problem of how best to live simply by reclaiming this lost Jewishness. Lacking the requisite faith and victimized by history, Asa Heshel and Herman can only eddy helplessly between tradition and modernity. It is, ironically, “meaningless literature” that saves Aaron from their fate and gives to his life the meaning theirs lack.

By devoting himself to the task of reanimating his lost people and their vanished world, Aaron embodies in his work the belief he cannot share. Thirteen years after the main action of

Shosha concludes, Aaron, now a famous Jewish-American writer, runs into Haiml while visiting Israel. As they sit together in the dark of Haiml's house, their words fleetingly call back the ghosts of long-departed Shosha, Celia, and Feitelzohn.

In the ensuing silence Aaron hears a cricket—"the same sound that came from the cricket that chirped in our kitchen when I was a boy. The room filled with shadows" (276). The cricket's chirp, the ghostly shadows-haunting reminders of the eternal presence of the past-are the symbolic stuff of Aaron's fictions. They are the flickering images from a sanctified time which it is the function of Aaron's writing-and of Shosha-to fix forever in memory.

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