Chapter IV

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This world has gone forever, destroyed by the most terrible of all scourges that have afflicted the Jews and other people in Poland. But it comes to life in Singer's memories and writing in general. Its mental and physical environment and its centuries-old traditions have set their stamp on Singer as a man and a writer, and provide the ever-vivid subject matter for his inspiration and imagination. It is the world and life of East European Jewry, such as it was lived in cities and villages, in poverty and persecution, and imbued with sincere piety and rites combined with blind faith and superstition. Its language was Yiddish - the language of the simple people and of the women, the language of the mothers which preserved fairytales and anecdotes, legends and memories for hundreds of years past, through a history which seems to have left nothing untried in the way of agony, passions, aberrations, cruelty and bestiality, but also of heroism, love and self-sacrifice.

Isaac Bashevis Singer was one of the great storytellers of the twentieth century. His writing is a unique blend of religious morality and social awareness combined with an investigation of personal desires. Though his work often took the form of parables or tales based on a
nineteenth century tradition, he was deeply concerned with the events of his time and the future of his people and their culture. Though not primarily nostalgic, Singer’s work hearkened back to a former time. The setting for much of the work was his native Poland, and the writing addressed existential and spiritual questions through folk tales and parables. These works caught the attention of a number of American writers including Saul Bellow and Irving Howe, who were greatly responsible for not only translating Singer’s work, but championing it as well. Throughout the 1960s Singer continued to write on questions of personal morality. After World War II there were few Yiddish writers remaining and Singer was not only a vocal proponent of Yiddish writing, but the major figure in Yiddish letters.

Through his writings Singer explores the fact that the loss of faith and maternal feelings has destroyed the future of mankind. The faith in God is imbibed in children through their parents. Singer has vivid memories of his parents, their Warsaw home and his childhood playmates. Through these memories he tries to reclaim the bygone past. In his Noble Lecture he said, “My father’s home on Krochmalna street in Warsaw was a study house…I have heard from my father and mother all the answers the faith in God could offer to those who doubt and search for the truth.”1
Singer is proud of his Jewishness and has great respect for his mother tongue- Yiddish. Jews have suffered a lot and Singer truly believes, “….the nations can learn so much from these Jews, their way of thinking, their way of bringing up children, their finding happiness where others see nothing but misery and humiliation.”

Singer prefers and feels comfortable to write in Yiddish- “a language of exile…..a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises…one can find in Yiddish tongue and in the Yiddish spirit, expression of pious joy, lust for life, longing for the Messiah, patience and deep appreciation of human individuality.”

His love for his own race and his mother tongue is also a different aspect of his faith in motherhood. In bestowing the noble Prize the Swedish Academy cited Mr. Singer for, “his impassioned narrative art, which roots in a polish-Jewish cultural tradition, brings the human conditions to life.”

Although Singer’s works are best known in their English versions, he wrote them in Yiddish. Singer has collaborated with many distinguished translators; among them were Saul Bellow, but most frequently Cecil Hemley. Many of his stories were published under the penname ‘Isaac Bashevis’, and much journalism as by ‘Warshofsky’. With his election to the national Institute of Arts and Letters in 1964,
Singer became its only American member to write in a language other than English.

Singer made his debut with *Satan in Goray* which was first published in Poland in 1935. It was written in the style imitative of medieval Yiddish chronicle and tells the story of the events surrounding the 17th Century false messiah Shabbatai Zevi. The people in this novel, as elsewhere with Singer, are often at the mercy of the capricious infliction of circumstance, but even more so, their own passions, manias, superstitions and fanatical dreams. Singer published 18 novels, 14 children's books, a number of memoirs, essays and articles, but he is best known as a writer of short-stories which have appeared in over a dozen collections. The first collection of Singer's short-stories in English *Gimpel, the Fool*, was published in 1957. The title story was translated by Saul Bellow and published in 1952 in Partisan Review. Later collections include *A Crown of Feathers* with notable masterpieces in between, such as, *The Spinoza of Market Street* or, *A Friend of Kafka*. The world of Singer’s stories is the world and life of East European Jewry, such as it was lived in cities and villages, in poverty and persecution, and imbued with sincere piety and rites combined with blind faith and superstition. It appears to include everything - pleasure and suffering, coarseness and subtlety. We find obtrusive carnality, spicy,
colorful, fragrant or smelly, lewd or violent. But there is also room for sagacity, worldly wisdom and humor.

One of Singer's most prominent themes is the clash between the old and the modern world, tradition and renewal, faith and free thought. Among many other themes, it is dealt with in Singer's big family chronicles - the novels, *The Family Moskat* \(^{10}\) *The Manor* \(^{11}\) and *The Estate* \(^{12}\). These extensive epic works have been compared with Thomas Mann's novel, *Buddenbrooks* \(^{13}\). Like Mann, Singer describes how old families are broken up by the new age and its demands, from the middle of the 19th Century up to the Second World War, and how they are split, financially, socially and humanly. Throughout the 1960s Singer continued to write on questions of personal morality. One of his most famous novels (due to a popular movie remake) was *Enemies, a Love Story* \(^{14}\) in which a Holocaust survivor deals with his own desires, complex family relationships, and the loss of faith. His feminist story, *Yentel* \(^{15}\) was also made into a popular movie, starring Barbra Streisand. Thanks to the film, the story has had a wide impact on culture.

The people in his novels are often at the mercy of the capricious infliction of circumstance, but even more so, their own passions. The passions are frequently of a sexual nature but also of another kind - manias and superstitions, fanatical hopes and dreams, the figments of
terror, the lure of lust or power, the nightmares of anguish, and so on. Even boredom can become a restless passion, as with the main character in the tragi-comic picaresque novel, *The Magician of Lublin*\(^{16}\), a most eccentric anti-hero, a kind of Jewish Don Juan and rogue, who ends up as an ascetic or saint. The passions and crazes are personified in Singer as demons, specters, ghosts and all kinds of infernal or supernatural powers from the rich storehouse of Jewish popular imagination. These demons are not only graphic literary symbols, but also real, tangible beings - Singer, in fact, says he believes in their physical presence. The middle ages rise up in his work and permeate the present. Everyday life is interwoven with wonders, reality spun from dreams, the blood of the past with the moment in which we are living.

**A Brief Survey of the Prominent Families in the Selected Stories of Singer:**

In his work *The Slave*\(^{17}\) Singer returned again to the 17th Century in a love story of a Jewish man and a Gentile woman. *The Slave* tells the story of Jacob, a scholar sold into slavery in the aftermath of the Khmelnytsky massacres, who falls in love with a gentile woman. Through the eyes of Jacob, the book recounts the history of Jewish settlement in Poland at the end of the 17th century. While most of the book's protagonists are Jews, the book is also a criticism of Orthodox
Jewish society. Jacob, the hero of the book, was a resident of Josefov, a Jewish town in Poland. After the Khmelnytsky massacres, in which his wife and three children were murdered by Cossacks, Jacob was sold as a slave to pagan peasant farmers. Throughout his several years of slavery, he struggled to maintain his Judaism by observing as many Jewish rituals as possible and by maintaining high ethical standards for himself. While in captivity, Jacob fell in love with his master's daughter, Wanda. While Jewish law and custom forbids Jews from even touching a woman a man is not married to and also forbids Jews from cohabiting with gentiles, Jacob's love for Wanda was too powerful to overcome and they engage in sexual intercourse. Later, Jews from Josefov came to ransom him by paying off Wanda's father and he returned Josefov. While in Josefov, Jacob dreamed of Wanda. In the dream, Wanda was pregnant and asked Jacob why he abandoned her and left the child in her womb to be raised by pagans. Jacob decided to return to the pagan village, take Wanda as a wife, and help her to convert to Judaism. Jacob and Wanda reached another town, Pilitz, where Jacob made his living as a teacher. In Pilitz, Wanda became known as Sarah and Jacob instructed to pretend that she was deaf and mute so as not to reveal her origin as a gentile. Sarah thirsted for knowledge and at night, Jacob taught her Jewish beliefs, myths, and practices. She suffered in silence as the women in the town gossiped about her right in front of her, as they thought that since she was
deaf, she would not hear them. Her secret was finally discovered when she screamed loudly during the birth of her and Jacob's son. Sarah died during the difficult birth, and was given a "donkey's burial" outside of the Jewish cemetery. Jacob called his baby son Benjamin (he likens himself to the biblical Jacob whose wife, Rachel, died in the childbirth of the biblical Benjamin); he traveled to the Land of Israel with the infant. Benjamin grew up to become a lecturer in a yeshiva in Jerusalem. 20 years later, Jacob returned to Pilitz and discovered that the town grew and that the cemetery had grown so much that the place where Sarah was buried was now within the bounds of the cemetery. The place where Sarah was buried was not prominently marked and unknown to the Jews of Pilitz. Jacob was weak and died during the visit to Pilitz. By coincidence (or perhaps, by a miracle), as a grave was being dug for Jacob, the bones of Sarah were found. The town decided to bury them together, side by side.

In 1966, The Forward serialized Singer’s novel Sonim, di Geshichte fun a Liebe- in English, Enemies, A Love Story. The preface from the author says,

Although I did not have the privilege of going through the Hitler Holocaust, I have lived for years in New York with refugees from this ordeal. I therefore hasten to say that this novel is by no means the story of the typical refugee, his life and struggle. Like most of my fictional
works, this book presents an exceptional case with unique combination of events. The characters are not only Nazi victims but also of their personalities and fates. If they fit into the general picture, it is because the exception is rooted in the rule. As a matter of fact, in literature, the exception is the rule.\textsuperscript{18}

The Protagonist Herman Broder is a refugee from Poland whose entire family has been annihilated in the Holocaust. He is living in Coney Island with Yadwiga. She is a Polish woman who hid him from the Nazis in a hayloft in her village. Herman makes a living by doing ghostwriting for a pompous and fake New York rabbi. However, Herman tells Yadwiga that he is a book salesman and visits a neurotic divorcee Masha Tortshiner. She lives in the Bronx with her mother who is an embittered concentration camp survivor. Suddenly, as if life wasn’t complicated enough for poor Herman, he finds out that his real wife, Tamara, who he thought had perished in Poland along with their children, is living in New York. This complication leads to make this story a tragic-comic tale of love and hate. Herman is fascinated by the occult and spends spare moments away from his women in the library reading up on dybbucks, ghosts and extrasensory perception. He feels that phrases like, ‘a better world’ and a ‘a brighter tomorrow’ are a ‘blasphemy on the ashes of the tormented’.\textsuperscript{19} He begins to envy the simple lives of animals and tells Masha, “I don’t want to live”\textsuperscript{20} But it is Masha who dies of an overdose
of sleeping pills. Herman disappears and Tamara searches for him in vain. Yadwiga moves into Tamara’s apartment and gives birth to Herman’s child; she names her Masha. Tamara works in a store so that Yadwiga can stay home and take care of the child. But Tamara refuses to marry again, saying half-jokingly that she will be content to be reunited with Herman in the next world.

In *The Magician of Lublin*²¹, we meet the family of Yasha Mazur who is living with his wife Esther. She is a devoted wife. She does all work that a good housewife is supposed to do. The Mazurs have no children, but their household is crowded with animals – a chattering monkey, a shrieking parrot, trilling canaries, even a pair of mares nick named Dust and Ashes. The family represents a typical magician’s family. Yasha is prosperous and respectable, yet his neighbors have little use for him. He doesn’t wear a beard, attends synagogue only on the high Holy Days, smokes on the Sabbath, consorts with musicians. A magician by profession, he can walk on a tightrope, skate on a wire, climb walls, open any lock. He often visits the family of Magda. She is his former assistant, living with her mother, who is a widow of a blacksmith. Magda and Yasha sleep together and in the morning they are served tea by their mother. Yasha also has relationships with the family of Emilia. He has a dangerous dual love affair with the aging Emilia and her adolescent
daughter Halina. Yasha is really two people— the respectable, conservative, conventional husband of Esther, who knows nothing of his hidden powers or his adventures, and the magician, the Houdini, who can open locks, escape from closed trunks, practice hypnotism and read minds, and at the same time, walk in the fear of God and the consequences of his deeds in this life and in the next. The protagonist Yasha is a personable and good hearted fellow whose scruples somehow keep him honest of every opportunity, and he continues to be likable, “Yasha is patently the perennial artist, who among other things, can ‘never understand how other people manage to live and spend their entire lives with one woman without becoming melancholy.’” When he is on his ‘tours’, he stops to visit Magda, a former assistant and motherly Zeftel, a deserted Jew wife. After an encounter with a colleague, who has brought a new pick-proof lock for Yasha to open— which of course he does – the magician goes to Warsaw. Their Yasha’s downfall awaits him in the form of a dangerous dual love affair with the aging Emilia and her adolescent daughter, Halina. This final temptation becomes the familiar climatic moment of a Singer tale, “the one false step” by which a man can “lose Paradise.” Finally Yasha realizes that he has “reduced others to dirt and did not see— pretended not to see— how he himself kept sinking deeper into the mud.” Yasha turns to prayer and comes to believe again in God— “a God who sees, who hears, who takes pity on Man, who
contains His Wrath, who forgives sin, who wants men to repent, who
punishes evil deeds, who rewards good deeds in this world and – what
was even more – I the other.”25 Yasha tells himself, “I must be a Jew! A
Jew like all the others.”26 The final pages of The Magician of Lublin
are devoted to Yasha’s prolonged atonement. He locks himself in a cell
where he is to stay until he feels that he is worthy again to live in the
world with the pious woman who loves him. Meanwhile, however, he has
driven Magda to suicide and hastened Zeftel on her way to life in a
brothel. To Irving Buchen, the lesson of the book is that “in slavery,
Yasha will find his true freedom.”27 What was Bashevis seeking to
communicate in The Magician of Lublin and The Slave? Like his
characters, he was intrigued by his non-Jewish milieu and discovered that
he was accepted there, at least superficially. But each man discovers
what it means to be attracted to the non-Jewish world and each falls in
love with a non-Jewish woman.

In 1978 came his Nobel Prize winner novel Shosha.28 The narrator
is a struggling writer named Aaron Greidinger who has returned to
Warsaw to take a job as a proof reader and translator. The title character,
Shosha appears in In My Father’s Court29 and several earlier stories. She
was Singer’s childhood companion at Number 10 Krochmalna Street.
“She was my first love and actually these kinds of love never die”.30 The
novel is set in the nineteen thirties when Poland was on the brink of the Nazi invasion. On Krochmalna Street, Aaron finds Shosha and her mother, Bashele, living in a poor condition. Shosha’s little sister, Yppe, has died in an epidemic; her older sister, Teibele, has gone to school and works as a bookkeeper. But Shosha lives at home with her mother, doomed to eternal childhood. She has neither grown nor aged; she is the soul of all that is innocent and uncorrupted.

Her figure had remained childlike….Shosha is superbly drawn as a creature of innocence, and her fascination for Aaron is made utterly credible. She is the Virgin of Krochmalna Street, drawing Aaron inevitably back into his own past. He marries her, although we know from the start that he will abandon her at last; everything in her character and in her circumstances seem to make this betrayal unavoidable.31

In the end Shosha is on her way to seek escape in Bialystok across the Russian border. But she weakens and can’t go on. “She cannot even walk anymore,” Singer explained once, “she just sits down and dies.”32 Alan Lelchuk called the novel, “a record of Jewish ghetto life in Poland……a kind of elegy for the dead.”33 In his introduction to Shosha Singer states, “It is a story of a few unique characters in unique circumstances.”34 To make that uniqueness believable, Singer has borrowed liberally from the past that is still alive in his own remarkable memories.
Throughout Singer’s writing, we get the glimpses of autobiographical references. References to his childhood memories, domestic figures, friends and relatives are scattered here and there. Singer himself admits, “All my books are about me. They are myself. The events in my stories are not always what did happen but always what might have happened.”35 Kresh too has made the same observation,

The contradictions in Singer’s own nature and the characters he writes about the conflicts between the rational and the irrational, the innocent and the worldly, the demonic and the cherubic, the real and the fantastic, the romantic and the conservative- can all be traced to the marriage of his parents and the legacy of a Polish-Jewish past.36

Singer has vivid memories of his life at Leoncin and Warsaw. “Our house was a poor house,” he recalls, “We were a rabbi’s house; very little furniture but many books.”37

Singer’s mother Bathsheba and Sister Hinde Esther seem to dominate almost all of his women characters. They serve as role models for many of his female protagonists. Paul Kresh, believes that Bathsheba, “might almost have been the model for Singer’s Yentel, for she was something of a scholar. She was self-taught in both the Hebrew language and the reading of holy books, and is said to have known the entire Jewish Bible practically by heart.”38 Yentl is a Jewish story in which a
girl’s hunger for learning is so immense that it forces her to abandon her
traditional female role, pretend to be a man, marry a woman, and
ultimately quit her home, leaving behind the man and fellow student who
has captured her heart. Janet Hadda writes

Singer may have written the story (of Yentl) without consideration of modern feminism, but
it is unlikely that he had forgotten his great-grandmother Temerl…. nor had he been
unaware of his mother Basheve’s proclivity for study and her conflicts over the requirements
and limitations imposed upon her as a female.\textsuperscript{39}

Nancy Berkowitz Bate is of the same opinion. She writes, ““She
(Bathsheba) was a rationalist. He (Singer) was aware of her great
intellect, and she certainly influenced the creation of Yentel…But unlike
Yentel, Bathsheba dedicated her life to her family, though she may have
chafed under her domestic burdens. ” …Singer recounts, “even at that
time, an ardent feminist…Her recipe was that all women should unite and
decide not to live with their husbands until they had resolved to make
peace once and forever.”” \textsuperscript{40}

The Use of Memory as a Strategy to Reconstruct the Bygone Past:

The shadow of Holocaust hovers over almost all of Singer’s
novels. Hitler, Nazism, concentration camps; serve as a background to the
plot, to which each character is related directly or indirectly. The
Holocaust was the state sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. The concentration camp is most closely associated with the Holocaust and remains an enduring symbol of Nazi regime. In 1933, the Nazis began to put into practice the racial ideology. The Nazis believed that the Germans were ‘racially superior’ and that there was a struggle for survival between them and ‘inferior races’. They saw Jews, Roma (Gypsies) and the handicapped as a serious biological threat to the purity of the ‘German (Aryan) race’, what they called the ‘master race.’ It was the Jews, Hitler once explained, who brought their ‘tyrannical God’ and His ‘life-denying Ten Commandments’ into the world’ it was against these Ten Commandments’ with their myriad prohibitions that Hitler wished to wage war. Only if he murdered every Jew in the world, he concluded, could he hope to extirpate fully the Jewish idea of one God and one moral standard. In 1935, after two years in power, Hitler escalated his anti-Jewish policies. The Nuremberg laws deprived all Jews of German citizenship, and marriages between Jews and Germans were declared illegal. Jews could not attend public schools, go to theatres, cinemas, or vacation resorts, or reside, or even walk, in certain sections of German cities. Jews were forced from Germany’s economic life. Between 1941 and 1945, murdering the Jews was as great a priority for Hitler as winning World War II, if anything greater. During
Hitler’s first five years in power, the Nazis did a great deal to make the lives of Jews miserable. In Hitler’s view, the Jews were evil incarnate. To the Nazis, every Jew was a mortal enemy of the German people. That is why German troops had no regrets about grabbing Jewish infants from their parents and throwing them against electrified fences. A new world was coined to describe this effort to wipe out a people; Genocide. By the late 1950’s, ‘Holocaust’ became the standard term used to describe the Nazi murder of the Jews. The word itself is religious referring to one of the animal sacrifices offered at the temple. Most of the six million Jewish victims of Hitler were, of course, wholly burned by the Nazis. Referring to their deaths as a ‘holocaust’ therefore implies that these deaths should be regarded as offering to God.

The Diary of Anne Frank\(^41\) gives horrifying description of the Holocaust atmosphere. Of the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust, the most famous is Anne Frank, a Jewish teenager living in Amsterdam when the Nazis occupied Holland. “For many people – non-Jews in particular- the Diary made the Holocaust real...the line in the diary for which she is most famous is: “In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart...” \(^42\) (She) came from an assimilated family...she made some deeply insightful observations about Nazi anti-Semitism:
Who has inflicted this upon us? Who has made us Jews different from all other people? Who has allowed us to suffer so terribly up till now? …We can never become just Netherlanders, or just English, or representatives of any country for that matter. We will always remain Jews, but we want to, too.  

Although Singer has lived the greater part of his life in the U.S, his fictional subjects remain the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Poland. Whatever the role of Jewish community, its very existence is indispensible to those novels set before 1939. After the Holocaust destroyed their world, and with it Singer’s natural setting, his people grow more fragile, his themes, more tentative. In his authors note to *Enemies, A Love Story*, Singer, resists historical determinism: “The characters are not only Nazi victims, but victims of their own personalities and fates” Joseph Shapiro of *The Penitent*, and Aaron Greidinger (*Shosha*) are survivors by virtue of escaping Poland before the Holocaust. Among the protagonists of Singer’s novels, only Herman Broader (*Enemies, A Love Story*) spends World War II entirely in Poland; and only in Enemies is narrative strategy and outcome so relentlessly determined by the Holocaust and its aftermath. Given the facts of Singer’s origin and upbringing, it is inevitable that the Holocaust looms large in his fiction. He is condemned by his subject matter to confront the Holocaust endlessly. The Holocaust survivors of Enemies are devastated by nightmares of Nazi pursuit. It is
first of Singer’s novel to be set in the post-Holocaust world. Neither Joseph nor Aaron seems to fashion primarily by his wartime experiences. Even Herman Broader ‘had been a victim long before Hitler’s day’: yet his ‘sorrow that could not be assuaged’, while not engendered by the Nazis, is shaped and intensified by the Holocaust. “Anyone who’s gone through all I have is no longer a part of this world”, 46 explains Herman, justifying his reclusive behavior to his employer, Rabbi Lampert. Talking about the sense of victimization in *Enemies*, Friedman makes a significant point:

In Singer’s complex portrait, Herman is at once an innocent victim and a heedless victimizer. So strong is the sense of victimization in *Enemies* that Herman not only refuses to eat flesh but gets up in the middle of the night to free mice from Masha’s traps. Because of its principle characters are victims of the Holocaust, *Enemies* falls into that important subgenre of Jewish literature dedicated to remembrance.47

Memory plays a vital role in *Enemies*. Friedman further elaborates:

Among Hitler’s countless victims were those whose burning desires to record the greatest infamy in human history may partially explain their survival. To their records, which consist mainly of diaries and retrospective memories, must be added a growing body of fiction like *Enemies* which seeks to re-create their experience. Herman’s wife Tamara; his mistress, Masha; and Masha’s mother, Shifrah Puah, survived both ghettos and concentration camps, the archetypal hells of Jewish incarnation and extermination.48
Singer’s Holocaust survivors can never forget. Eyewitness to the slaughter of their people, Tamara, Masha and Shifrah Puah are compulsive retellers of their stories. The three women survive as the sum of their Holocaust experiences. Shifrah Puah’s “whoever has tasted death has no more use of life” \(^{49}\) applies in varying degrees to Masha and Tamara as well. All three bear the guilt of their own survival and the stigmata of Nazi hatred. Each woman’s response to her experience of the Holocaust represents a version of Jewish survival. Shifrah Puah believes that God took all the pious Jews and that she survives only because of her sins; Tamara, comfortable in her room in New York, imagines that she has “betrayed all the Jews in Europe.”\(^{50}\) Shifrah Puah, called ‘back from the other world’ by Masha and Tamara, returned from the dead, derived great mortal authority by their virtue of their ‘resurrection.’ Even the cynical Herman admits that everything that Shifrah Puah touches is ‘holy’, and that whatever Tamara says must be believed. Tamara’s uncle who fled to America only weeks before Hitler’s invasion of Poland, claims special status for all Holocaust survivors. This pious Hasid, whose own faith has been shaken, feels that, anyone who has witnessed the carnage has reason not to believe in the Almighty and in his mercy. Holocaust survivors are ambivalent about children, torn between the desire to restore Jewish losses and the fear of bringing innocence into an evil world. Shifrah Puah wants a grandchild; “someone to name after the
murdered Jews”⁵¹ More typical of the reactions of Singer’s Holocaust survivors to the prospect of child bearing is Tamara’s “What for? So that the Gentiles will have someone to burn? ”⁵² Yadwiga’s pregnancy is of course, accidental: “Herman took care not to make Yadwiga pregnant. In a world in which one’s children could be dragged away from their mother and shot, one had no right to have more children.”⁵³ “Herman’s nihilism finds its most obsessive expression in his revulsion against children, as if by refusing to procreate he might abolish the creation he finds so depraved.”⁵⁴

The novel most directly concerned with the Holocaust, *Enemies, A Love Story*, naturally contains some of Singer’s most bitter reflections on the human condition. The Holocaust, like previous disasters, was visited upon the Jewish people by God as punishment for their sins- is equally unacceptable to the major characters in *Enemies, A Love Story*. For Herman, Masha and Tamara the Holocaust is evidence that God has broken His covenant with His chosen people. ‘Almighty Sadist,’ Herman calls God, “Jews must be slaughtered- that’s what God wants,”⁵⁵ cries Masha. Gibbons is right in saying that:

The shadow of Hitler hangs heavily over this entire novel, and the most important image in it is the hayloft in which Herman has to hide from the Nazis under the protection of the Polish peasant, Yadwiga. Having caught the habit of hiding in his youth, Herman conducts his life as
a continuous peregrination from one hayloft to another.\textsuperscript{56}

Linguistic isolation adds to the staggering losses suffered by Holocaust survivors. It is a constant reminder of lost family, lost friends, lost community, and of their own marginality. Herman, Tamara, Masha and Shifrah Puah all claim that their lives effectively ended before they arrived in New York. They regard their survival as accidental and themselves as somehow superfluous. Often they pray for death and contemplate suicide. \textit{Shosha}, like \textit{Enemies, A Love Story} invokes the past, but by different means and different end. Despite their different uses of the past, both the novels chronicle Jewish losses by stressing the proximity of the Holocaust. Hitler’s extinction of Polish Jewry, a fate accompli in \textit{Enemies, A Love Story} looms on the horizon in \textit{Shosha}. Sharing the setting of \textit{The Family Moskat}, \textit{Shosha} also shares its overpowering sense of doom, although the German bombs that punctuate the closing pages of \textit{The Family Moskat} have yet to fall when the main action of Shosha concludes. Asa Heshel’s despair in \textit{The Family Moskat} is everywhere apparent in \textit{Shosha} and is echoed in Aaron’s “There can’t be any answer for suffering- not for the sufferer.”\textsuperscript{57}

Children are conspicuously absent from Enemies but are unfailingly invoked in the Holocaust stories of major characters.
To an endlessly besieged people, children represent the only hope of continuity, so much so that reproduction is enjoined upon traditional Jews as a sacred duty. The murder of children was therefore the most devastating aspect of Hitler’s war against Jews for ‘in making certain that their children would be ash the Germans deprived human history of one of the versions of its future.\(^5\)

**Mother Figure:**

Women are predominantly seen as mothers in Singer’s writing. Frances Vargas Gibbons puts forth a similar idea. The Symbol of mother figure is very much predominant in Singer’s fairy tale, *The Milk of a Lioness*\(^5\) “The only mother in the story is the lioness. Female figure is split into a loving bride, Nesika, and a fierce mother, the lioness. To represent motherhood in the figure of the most aggressive and carnivorous of animals is a provocative act. Isaac Bashevis Singer has always acknowledged the autobiographical nature of much of his work. Once his mother told him that she resembles her own father, and says, “My father was a lion.” She (Bathsheba) was “lion like mother of Singer’s experience” and referring to Bathsheba’s dryness to feed the babies, says that the milk of fierce Bathsheba was as scarce as it was powerful.”\(^6\) We can find a striking resemblance between Singer’s mother and Masha, fierce and passionate woman in *Enemies, A Love Story.*
Absence of father and mothers playing role of fathers is a striking note in Singer’s fictions. In his novel, *The Magician of Lublin*, we see Yasha’s assistant Magda living with her mother; in *Enemies, A Love Story*, Masha is taking care of her mother (her father being the victim of Nazi camps); Shosha is being taken care by her mother Bashele. Gibbons points out, “Singer’s adult heroes show a pattern of enjoying living with adoring mother-in-law in homes with absent father-in-law. Yasha stays with Elzbieta while having the affair with her daughter Magda, Herman does likewise with Shifrah Puah and Masha, Aaron with Bashele and Shosha… a way of having a pampering and nurturing mother through their daughters.”  

All the Singer’s heroes have to listen to the perpetual cry of their wives, or lover, or mistresses: ‘I want a baby’. With a rare exception here and there, all the women, the moment they start to have a relationship with the heroes, show willingness for pregnancy and motherhood. And Tamara has a reason for this, “If a woman loves a man, she wants to have his child”. Herman’s wife Tamara bears children, but that is against her wish. Before marriage, when she gets pregnant, she refuses to abort and though she uses that fact to persuade him to marry her, it shows her urge to become mother. When she loses her children in Nazi camp she considers it as a heavy loss and blames God: “They grew up overnight, I
tried to give them some of my rations, but they refused to eat any of my shares. They went to their deaths like saints. Souls exist; it’s God who doesn’t.” 63 She accuses Herman for not being good father when they were alive. In fact, that’s the bitter truth that haunts him constantly and makes him unable to ask her about children; and Tamara the mother, alleges of he not even asking about the children. Like a typical woman and mother, she even has feelings for would-be mother, Yadwiga. At first, she calls Yadwiga, “peasant…Right shoe on left foot”. 64 But when she comes to know about Yadwiga’s pregnancy, she accuses Herman for his relationship with Masha. Tamara, the experienced mother takes charge of the would-be-mother, and makes things easier for her. Together they are going to raise the child; the mother, even without the male partner is capable of making impossible things possible. It was a severe shock to Herman, the man and the father; and even the greatest shock to the world that believes, ‘woman is nothing without man.’ In The Magician of Lublin, Esther longs for a child. She looks much younger than she is. She socializes with girls, rather than with older matrons. The childlessness that she regrets so grievously is the very thing that keeps her young. Shosha is no exception to the rule, she is desperately longing for a child. She tells Aaron, “I want to have a child with you…I want to be a mother…I want a child to say Kaddish for me when I die.” 65 Shosha herself is very much aware of the fact that she cannot bear children as she
is “small.” She gives explanation as to why she is like that: “I got sick and stopped growing. They took me to Dr. Kniaster and he gave me a prescription, but it didn’t help…I am like a midget…I am grown up and I look like a child.” Throughout the novel, Shosha’s barrenness, as she is “sick”, has been taken very seriously by many characters, except the protagonist. Betty considers her as an “idiot” and says that she doesn’t even believe that such a woman is capable of living with a man. She feels that Shosha surely can’t have a child. Aaron’s mother hopes that, “the children will take after you, not after Shosha.” Shosha’s own father is doubtful about her chances of being pregnant, “If she ever has a child—and I can’t imagine how, unless they perform a caesarean- I’ll be a grandfather.” Shosha’s biological deprivation from becoming a mother and her urge to become one, stand strongly in contrast to each other. The mystery of, which one is going to win, is resolved unsatisfactorily in her death.

As spinsterhood and barrenness was regarded something as a curse by religious Jews, so is the motherhood before marriage. In Shosha, we have an example of that, when Shosha was taken to a rabbi to get a paper saying that she is a mukasetz (a girl who has lost her innocence without a man, by accident). Shosha’s cry for motherhood is even greater as her
hopes of motherhood are destroyed by the biological problems as well as her husband’s reluctance to have children.

In Jewish religion, woman is seen predominantly as mother, and womanness is directly related to motherhood. A man may pay visits to Rabbi’s court, but a woman functions primarily as wife and mother. A girl’s eagerness to marry is matched only by her eagerness to reproduce. If a man’s highest calling is to study Jewish text, woman’s is to bear Jewish children. Childless women resort first to prayers, then to amulets and exorcists in attempting to conceive. This Jewish urge of motherhood is echoed in Singer’s women as they express their wish to become a mother. They demonstrate “the creative principle capable of restoring life to men … in whom, the springs of life have been dried up.” 69 To represent a woman’s eternal role of a mother, we have Shifrah Puah in Enemies who wishes to become a grandmother: “I wanted so much to have a grandchild… I’d hoped it would be a boy and he would be called Meyer.” 70 But there is one thing similar to all Singer heroes: they don’t want to become fathers.

When the women’s urge to become a mother is not fulfilled (either by their male partner or by fate), they take their heroes to be their sons and satisfy their need of motherhood. We are told in Enemies that for Yadwiga, her husband is her father and her son. She takes good care of
him, with great affection—only a mother could have: “Yadwiga started to soap his back, his arms, his loins. He had frustrated her longing to bear children and so had taken the place of child for her. She fondled him and played with him.” 71 Tamara, with whom after some time, Herman develops a platonic relationship, takes up a motherly role in his life. Just like a mother knows her child Tamara knows him thoroughly. She is the one who gives him advice and tries to solve his problems of relationships. She takes him to Cafeteria and, “seated him at a table and brought him orange juice, a roll, an omelet, and coffee. She watched him eat for a moment, then went to get breakfast for herself…His head bent lower and lower. Women had ruined him, but they had also showed him compassion” 72 Similarly in Magician of Lublin, Yasha Mazur is taken good care by his affectionate wife and continues to take even when he becomes the penitent and locks himself in a cell. In Shosha we have Celia Chenshiner who calls Aaron as Tsutsik (little boy). She even calls him ‘Yeshiva boy’ and gives him an affectionate kiss saying, “He writes like a grown up, but he is still a child.” 73 Aaron, Yasha and Herman’s deliberate avoidance of fatherhood is obvious of the fact that they themselves want to reclaim their childhood. They like to be treated as a son by their lovers. They are afraid of the fact that children will share their love.
Pregnancy and childbirth are circumstances that cannot be mastered by the human will, by desire, or by imagination. Singer’s heroes are trying to prove their superiority over God and Nature. They have different ways of running from reality. Yasha locks himself in a cell where he attains a position important than a rabbi; Herman simply disappears leaving all problems behind; Aaron involves himself in abstract discussions. The heroes escape adult responsibilities and show their liking for womb-like enclosures, in which they can both recover the mother and self-sufficiency, and hide from marital and reproductive duties.

All the male and female protagonists of Singer’s novels show an intense tendency to cherish the memories of the past. But at the same time Holocaust and Hitler days weigh on their mind constantly. As Singer himself believes that Jews never forget; because to remember is indeed an attempt to reclaim and Singer and his characters wish to return to their past. To reclaim the past history is important from many points of view. Singer is very well aware of the fact that, “more and more children grow up without faith in God, without belief in reward and punishment, in the immortality of the soul and even in the validity of ethics.”74 Singer mourns further, “Not only has our generation lost faith in providence but
also in man himself, in his institutions and often in those who are nearest to him. \textsuperscript{75} Lawrence Friedman is right in his observation:

Singer’s characters invariably grow up in a traditional Jewish home which in itself embodies a moral decision….the home is the repository of those moral values expressed by “Jewishness”. As such, it represents a state of mind, a way of life, an ultimate spiritual destination. Whether by choice or by necessity Singer’s protagonist learns that the path of righteousness leads homeward. Wisdom lies not in the apprehension of things unknown but in the regaining of things lost or forgotten. Singer’s fiction is therefore filled with penitents who, seduced temporarily by worldly lures and aspirations, return to the faith of their fathers. \textsuperscript{76}

Singer knows that the traditional Jewish values survive mostly in memories. Characters like Yasha Mazur accept enclosure as the necessary antidote to an unclean world. They first renounce the world, and then refashion their Jewish identity. Yasha, Herman, Aaron not only strive to regain their Jewish identity they also wish for a motherly protection; which Aaron reclaims through the memories of Shosha and her mother; Herman through his escape; and Yasha through his womb-like enclosure.

Woman, in any culture is always associated with love, care, nurture, preservation, and protection of human values; whereas man is associated with war and destruction. In an ideal situation, man should have the capacity to love like woman and woman should have the
protective nature like man. For the protection of humanity man must have feminine feelings. Singer regrets the fact that man has lost the woman within. Singer truly believes that the cruelty is the direct result of the loss of feminine feelings. Man has lost it out of an inferiority complex. Singer emphasizes the need of maternal affection for mankind to save the humanity from war and destruction. And that explains why all Singer’s heroes, Aaron, Yasha, Herman are so full of compassion with woman. Throughout Singer’s novels women who possess the capacity to love and nurture acquired the status of God. The importance of mother figure is emphasized again and again. She is viewed as the only hope for the betterment of the world which is brutally destroyed by the people like Hitler.

**Jewish Life:**

Singer’s writing gives an apt and elaborate picture of Jewish life with all its essence of cultural and religious values. “He sprinkled his books with a profusion of Talmudic knowledge and populated some of his supposedly realistic fiction with supernatural creatures.” 77 Singer did not seem to have felt that his people and their history needed the service of a cosmetic artist who would conceal their flaws and emphasize their virtues. Alfred Kazin observes that, “Singer swims happily in the whole ancient and modern tradition of the Jews- Jews are his life” but adds that
he (Singer) would certainly agree with Mark Twain’s reply to Anti-Semites, ‘Jews are members of the human race; worse than that I cannot say of them’.” 78

Jews have suffered from spiritual curse. Old Testament gives innumerable events when Jews disobeyed and were cursed by God, “Thou Shall Roam.”79 This curse was used as religion bias as translated into racial bias- Semite race- hatred for Jews on the basis of their qualities. Along with God, it is the figure of Moses who dominates the Torah. Acting at God’s behest, it is he who leads the Jews out of slavery, unleashes the Ten Plagues against Egypt, guides the freed slaves for forty years in the wilderness, carries down the Law from Mt. Sinai and prepares the Jews to enter the land of Canaan. The belief in a Messiah and a messianic age is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition. In the concentration camps, it is reported that many Jews sang Ani ma amin (I believe with a full heart in the coming of the Messiah)80 while walking to the gas chambers. Most significantly, Jewish tradition affirms at least five things about the Messiah- he will be descendant of King David, gain sovereignty over the land of Isreal, gather the Jews there from the corners of the earth, restore them to full observance of Torah law, and, as a grand finale, bring peace to the whole world.
Singer is a writer who seems tied to the past and the distant, mythic regions of Eastern Europe. But he is also a writer who has written extensively about America in *Enemies: A Love Story*, *The Penitent*, and the posthumously published *Meshugah* \(^{81}\) and *Shadows on the Hudson* \(^{82}\). He sees Jews being transformed by their experiences here in America and fears what will happen if Jewishness disappears under the pressure of a materialistic culture of the kind America and the modern world seem to offer. To make his point absolutely clear, Singer declares:

Through his language, the Yiddish writer is bound to the past. His boundaries are, spatially, the borders of Poland, Russia and Rumania, and, temporally, the date of his departure for America. Here he must, in a literary sense, dine on leftovers; only food prepared in the old world can nourish him in the new. \(^{83}\)

Despite all the complexities of his religious outlook, Singer lived in the midst of the Jewish community throughout his life. He did not seem to be comfortable unless he was surrounded by Jews; particularly Jews born in Europe. Although he spoke English, Hebrew, and Polish quite fluently, he always considered Yiddish his natural tongue, he always wrote in Yiddish and he was the last famous American author writing in this language. After he had achieved success as a writer in New York, Singer and his wife began spending time during the winters with the Jewish community in Miami. Eventually, as senior citizens, they moved
to Miami and identified closely with the European Jewish community: a street was named after him long before he died. Singer was buried in a traditional Jewish ceremony in a Jewish cemetery. Especially in his short fiction, he often wrote about various Jews having religious struggles; sometimes these struggles became violent, bringing death or mental illness. In one story he meets a young woman in New York whom he knew from an Orthodox family in Poland. She has become a kind of hippie, sings American folk music with a guitar, and rejects Judaism, although the narrator comments that in many ways she seems typically Jewish. The narrator says that he often meets Jews who think they are anything but Jewish, and yet still are.

Singer remains an unquestionably Jewish writer, yet his precise views about Jews, Judaism, and the Jewish God are open to interpretation. Whatever they were, they lay at the center of his literary art.
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